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LOUIS MENAND (A CRITIC AT LARGE, P. 66) is a professor of English at Harvard.

HILTON ALS (THE THEATRE, P. 76) co-curated two exhibits opening this fall: "Desdemona for Celia by Hilton," at the Gallery Met, and a retrospective of the artist Christopher Knowles, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

KADIR NELSON (COVER) wrote and illustrated "If You Plant a Seed," which came out in March. His work is currently on view at the RJD Gallery, in Sag Harbor.

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ALSO:

DAILY COMMENT / CULTURAL COMMENT: Opinions and reflections by Joshua Rothman and Michael Specter.

VIDEO: How to use a semicolon, in this week's "Comma Queen," with Mary Norris. Plus, lunch with Bob Mankoff, in a new episode of "The Cartoon Lounge."

PHOTO BOOTH: Thomas Beller on Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick's photographs from Angola Prison.

PODCASTS: On Out Loud, Sarah Larson and Adam Gopnik discuss children's books with Amelia Lester and David Haglund. Plus, on the Political Scene, Amy Davidson, Margaret Talbot, and Ryan Lizza talk about the Democratic primary field.

POETRY: Ellen Bass and Eileen Myles read their poems. Plus, in this month's Poetry Podcast, Sophie Cabot Black reads "The Ship Pounding," by Donald Hall, and chats with Paul Muldoon.

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THE MAIL

INDEFENSIBLE SYSTEM

Rachel Aviv presents a compelling story about a miscarriage of justice: the conviction of Rodricus Crawford, which took place in a setting redolent of Gothic Dixie and involved a prosecutor whose behavior was so erratic that colleagues speculated that he had a brain tumor ("Revenge Killing," July 6th & 13th). But readers should not think that spectacular elements are required before a wrongful conviction can occur. The Crawford conviction was constructed from a set of mundane errors, occurring within a troubled system. A medical examiner leaped to an unwarranted conclusion, a man with a criminal record was targeted, an overzealous prosecutor overreacted under pressure. Everyone involved in the case was responsible to some degree, either by making a mistake or by failing to anticipate or intercept someone else's. This includes people at a remove from the Crawford case—for example, those who have developed the hopeless systems for medical examination and criminal defense which have shaped the environment of the ones at the sharp end. Yes, this happened in Louisiana, and, yes, race played a role, but it could happen anywhere. The problems outlined in Aviv's story are features of everyday life in America's criminal-justice system.

James Doyle
Brookline, Mass.

GET WITH THE PROGRAM

Jeffrey Toobin, in his article about the Floreses, a mixed-status family, describes a "comprehensive breakdown in public policy" with regard to immigration reform ("American Limbo," July 27th). I write as a co-director of the Undocumented Patients Project at the Hastings Center. Families like the Floreses have also been systematically excluded from public benefits that provide access to health care; owing to the parents' ineligibility for Affordable Care Act insurance subsidies or for Medicaid, the Floreses have limited coverage options, and are buying insurance on

the open market to help pay for a U.S. citizen's cancer treatment. Only a handful of states have elected to use state funds to cover undocumented children. Only New York, Massachusetts, and California offer access to state-funded Medicaid for those enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. The undocumented population is generally young, but people do get sick, and undocumented workers tend to be employed in jobs—food services, construction, farm labor—that expose them to a heightened risk of injury. Our patchwork of safety-net programs, federal and state exclusions, and expensive "emergency" provisions makes neither economic nor moral sense.

Nancy Berlinger
New York City

The Secure Communities program that Toobin mentions is not just an inconvenience; complex diseases like cancer, diabetes, and asthma unfairly afflict minority children. Recent research indicates that long-term exposure to stress—like the constant fear of getting pulled over and the shame felt at getting mean looks from suspecting neighbors—may translate into serious genetic damage that can have a multi-generational grip on immigrant children. A compounding stress effect happens when parents are overwhelmed by heavy medical bills and pained by watching their child suffer during treatment. For the child, precious days of school are lost. This really hurts the Latino community. Census-data confirmation, that Hispanics now outnumber whites in California, proves the urgency of policy reform. We're no longer talking about laws that affect a small segment of the United States.

Jennifer Adams
San Francisco, Calif.

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter or return letters.

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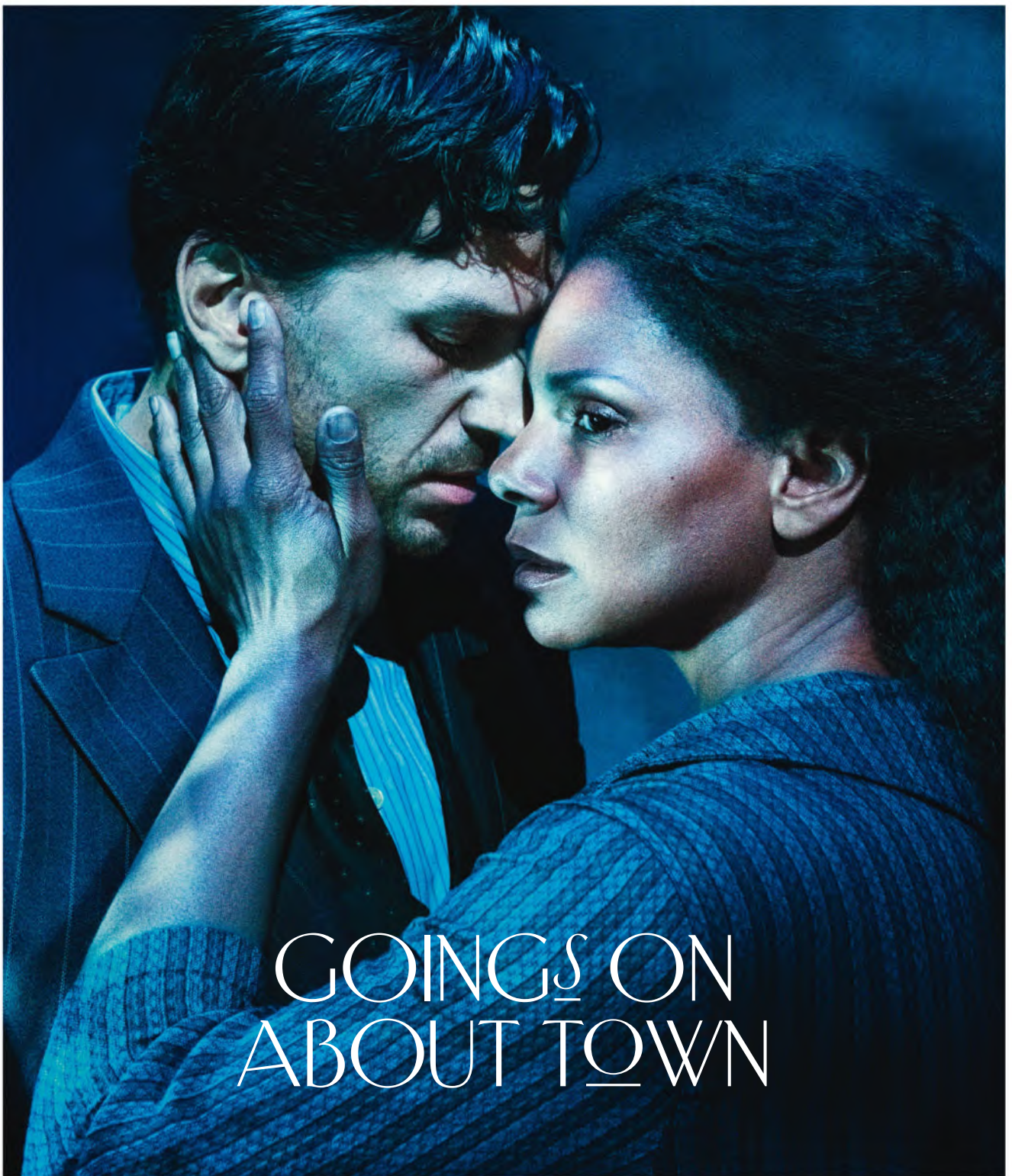
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

AUGUST 2015 WEDNESDAY 19TH • THURSDAY 20TH • FRIDAY 21ST • SATURDAY 22ND • SUNDAY 23RD • MONDAY 24TH • TUESDAY 25TH

NO ONE WILL EVER mistake the Broadway actress Audra McDonald for an “ugly lump of a woman.” An extraordinarily versatile performer, McDonald exudes both vulnerability and toughness, glamour and earthiness. At the Williamstown Theatre Festival (through Aug. 23) McDonald transforms herself into Josie Hogan, the strapping farm girl at the center of Eugene O’Neill’s 1947 play “A Moon for the Misbegotten,” a companion piece to “Long Day’s Journey Into Night.” Barefoot and dust-smeared, McDonald masks her natural allure as she pumps water, fixes stew, wields a club, and attempts a clumsy seduction of her landlord, James Tyrone (played by Will Swenson, McDonald’s husband), whom she loves, desperately and hopelessly. Together, Josie and Jamie try vainly, as in any O’Neill play, to put an end to suffering.

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FOOD & DRINK

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC



CLASSICAL MUSIC

CONCERTS IN TOWN

Mostly Mozart

The Mostly Mozart Festival closes the forty-ninth season with its accustomed thoughtfulness and curatorial brio. Aug. 18-19 at 7:30: On a program entitled "Joshua Bell Plays Bach," the celebrated violinist brings two pieces by the Baroque master to Lincoln Center, leading the Festival Orchestra from his instrument in the Violin Concerto in E Major (once a staple, now rare) and in the Chaconne for Solo Violin, the latter work spiffed up with an orchestral accompaniment by Mendelssohn. The program opens and closes with the orchestra led by another stellar violinist-conductor, the period-performance maestro Andrew Manze, who directs two works inspired by Bach: Mozart's Adagio and Fugue in C Minor and Schumann's Symphony No. 2 in C Major. • Aug. 21-22 at 7:30: Mostly Mozart's music director, Louis Langrée, leads the Festival Orchestra in the season's closing program. Joined by an impressive roster of vocal soloists—Sarah Tynan, Andrew Staples, and Brindley Sherratt, as well as James Bagwell's Concert Chorale of New York—he brings his nimble and propulsive style to Haydn's masterwork of joyful Enlightenment religiosity, "The Creation." (Avery Fisher Hall. mostlymozart.org.)

Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble: "Beaumarchais Trilogy"

The company, which gives young singers the chance to try out new roles in fully staged productions, presents an opera-buffa equivalent to Wagner's grandiloquent "Ring" cycle. Three operas corresponding to Beaumarchais's trilogy of Figaro plays—Paisiello's "Barber of Seville," Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," and Hiram Titus's "Rosina" (1980)—are staged sequentially, giving audiences the chance to follow Figaro, Almaviva, Rosina, and Cherubino from young love to mature heartbreak in the course of two or three days. (Rose Nagelberg Theatre, Baruch Performing Arts Center, 55 Lexington Ave. dellarteopera.org. Aug. 19-21 at 7:30, Aug. 22 at 2 and 7:30, and Aug. 23 at 2. Through Aug. 30.)

"Carl Nielsen & Jean Sibelius 150th Anniversary Concert"

Any celebration of these two composers—the first a national treasure in Denmark, the second in Finland—is going to have a serious cast, and this song recital by the baritone Thomas Storm and the pianist Tanya Gabriëlian is no exception. The free concert's program ranges from the gentle, melancholic strains of Nielsen's "Five Texts by J. P. Jacobsen" to the brooding Romanticism of Sibelius (several songs, including "Come Away, Death"). (Scandinavia House, 58 Park Ave., at 38th St. Aug. 20 at 7. To reserve free tickets, call 212-847-9740.)

Taka Kigawa

The stalwart New York pianist, a gifted advocate for modernism, begins his annual late-summer

recital at (Le) Poisson Rouge with music by one of the movement's patron saints, Debussy ("Images," Books I and II), before launching into more recent scores by Tristan Murail and Marco Stroppa ("Traietтория . . . Deviated," for piano and live electronics). (158 Bleecker St. lpnyc.com. Aug. 24 at 7:30.)

OUT OF TOWN

Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival

The flutist Marya Martin's festival brings an elite roster of chamber musicians to the ever-desirable vacation spot. The first concert finds Martin collaborating with such musicians as the pianist Gilles Vonsattel and the cellist Paul Watkins (of the Emerson String Quartet) in works by Boccherini, Paul Schoenfield, and Brahms (the Piano Quintet); the second is an evening of Bach offered by the pianist Orion Weiss, the violinist Anthony Marwood, and the violist Richard O'Neill; and the final, season-closing concert features Martin, Marwood, and other musicians performing music by Haydn, Sibelius (the charming Sonatina in E Major for Violin and Piano), the contemporary composer Philippe Hersant, and Schumann (the rousing Piano Quintet). (bridgehamptonpresbyterianchurch.org. Aug. 19 at 7 and Aug. 22-23 at 6:30.)

Philadelphia Orchestra at SPAC

The Philadelphia Orchestra is completing its residency at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center with four final concerts under the baton of its energetic music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. On Wednesday, the orchestra's concertmaster, David Kim, is out front in "An Evening on the Rhine," which includes, in addition to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, music by Brahms and Beethoven; Thursday night's program, "Ensembles of the Orchestra," features music by Saint-Saëns, Ravel, Massenet, and Tchaikovsky (the mighty Symphony No. 5). On Friday night, the glamorous soloist Joshua Bell's interpretation of Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 is bookended with music by Dvořák and Brahms (the mercurial Third Symphony). The closing concert showcases the pianist Beatrice Rana in Prokofiev's fiery Piano Concerto No. 2 alongside music by Nico Muhly ("Mixed Messages"), Glazunov, Rachmaninoff (a colorful orchestration of his Prelude in C-Sharp Minor by the Philadelphians' long-ago leader Leopold Stokowski), and Tchaikovsky (the "1812 Overture"). (Saratoga, N.Y. spac.org. Aug. 19-22 at 8.)

Glimmerglass Festival

Aug. 20 at 7:30 and Aug. 22 at 1:30: Glimmerglass has a notable track record in reviving eighteenth-century operas. Vivaldi's stately, sparkling "Cato in Utica" gives a talented cast, including Thomas Michael Allen, John Holiday, and Sarah Mesko, plenty of opportunities to display their aptitude for Baroque coloratura. Tazewell Thompson directs; Ryan Brown conducts. • Aug. 21 at 7:30: In "Candide," Leonard Bernstein and his collaborators transformed the satirical novella by Voltaire into a brisk and witty Broadway entertainment in which the hapless Candide (Andrew Stenson); his beloved, Cunegonde (Kathryn Lewek); and his pedantic tutor, Pangloss (David Garrison), try to maintain an optimistic outlook despite enduring an endless string of calamities, including war, an earthquake, and the Spanish Inquisition. The production is helmed by Glimmerglass's artistic and general director, Francesca Zambello; Joseph Colaneri. • Aug. 22 at 8: The magnificent bass-baritone Eric Owens puts

another feather in his Verdian cap with his first outing as the dastardly Thane of Cawdor, in the composer's flinty treatment of "Macbeth." Also with strong performances from Melody Moore, Soloman Howard, and Michael Brandenburg. Anne Bogart directs; Colaneri. • Aug. 23 at 1:30: An acclaimed season at Glimmerglass comes to a close with the final performance of "The Magic Flute." The Mohegan director Madeline Sayet's English-language adaptation of the work moves the mythical action to the forests of the Northeast, where the characters commune with, rather than escape, the natural world. Sean Panikkar and Jacqueline Echols lead the ensemble cast; Carolyn Kuan. (Cooperstown, N.Y. glimmerglass.org.)

Maverick Concerts

Once a year, the Maverick's woodland music chapel resounds with the tones of a chamber orchestra conducted by the series' director, Alexander Platt. His Saturday-night program mixes scintillating early-twentieth-century classics by Falla ("El Amor Brujo," with the soprano Maria Todaro) and Britten ("Young Apollo," with the pianist Stephen Gosling) with music that celebrates Woodstock's musical heritage (by Henry Cowell and Robert Starer); Copland's "Appalachian Spring." Suite ties it all together. The exciting young Ariel Quartet—with a guest artist, the baritone Thomas Storm—arrives on Sunday afternoon, performing string quartets by Beethoven (the "Razumovsky" Quartet No. 2 in E Minor) and Tchaikovsky (No. 1 in D Major), in addition to works by Stravinsky and Barber ("Dover Beach"). (Woodstock, N.Y. maverickconcerts.org. Aug. 22 at 6 and Aug. 23 at 4.)

Windham Chamber Music Festival

Two magnetic artists, the American cellist Zuill Bailey and the Russian pianist Natasha Paremski, come to the little festival tucked away in Catskills ski country to perform a high-energy concert of music by Stravinsky (the "Suite Italienne") and Rachmaninoff (the Sonata for Cello and Piano, as well as three of the composer's solo-piano Preludes). (Windham Civic and Performing Arts Center, Windham, N.Y. 518-734-3868. Aug. 22 at 8.)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center at SPAC

One of the Society's most recent ventures is a summertime series at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center; as with the regular season, the lineup features favorite masterworks performed by major musicians. The first of the two final concerts finds the organization's directors, the pianist Wu Han and the cellist David Finckel, collaborating with the violinist Arnaud Sussmann (among others) in music by Beethoven, Penderecki (the String Trio, one of the prolific Polish master's most enduring works), and Schumann (the Piano Quartet). The second revels in the sounds of massed strings with Strauss's Sextet from "Capriccio," Schoenberg's "Verklärte Nacht," and Mendelssohn's joyous Octet in E-Flat Major. (Saratoga, N.Y. spac.org. Aug. 23 at 3 and Aug. 25 at 8.)

Music Mountain

The Harlem Quartet, almost a decade old, is not only a symbol of racial diversity in classical music but an outstanding string quartet by any measure. It offers a mixed program in its upcoming concert at the cherished chamber-music venue, playing movements from quartets by Beethoven, Bartók, and Borodin (the luminous Nocturne from the Quartet No. 2) as well as Dvořák's bumptious Piano Quintet (with Francine Kay). (Falls Village, Conn. 860-824-7126. Aug. 23 at 3.)



MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
"Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends." Through Oct. 4.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
"Take an Object." Opens Aug. 22.

MOMA PS1
"Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys: Fine Arts." Through Aug. 31.

WHITNEY MUSEUM
"America Is Hard to See." Through Sept. 27.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
"Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks." Through Aug. 23.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
"Spiders Alive!" Through Oct. 29.

BRONX MUSEUM
"Bronx Calling: The AIM Biennial." Through Sept. 20.

COOPER-HEWITT, SMITHSONIAN DESIGN MUSEUM
"Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio." Through Jan. 3.

NEW MUSEUM
"Albert Oehlen: Home and Garden." Through Sept. 13.

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
"Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange." Through Oct. 25.

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Guggenheim Museum "Doris Salcedo"

Few artists tease dark, political meaning from everyday objects with the emotional force of Salcedo, who was born in Bogota, Colombia, in 1958. Synchdocal and oblique, her sculptural installations—worn shoes trapped behind panes of vellum, men's shirts coated in plaster and impaled on spikes—convey a visceral sense of anguish and dread. They evoke the victims of political violence who have inspired the artist for decades, from *los desaparecidos* ("the disappeared") of South America to people lost to mass shootings in the U.S. (The retrospective, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, has been thoughtfully laid out in the Guggenheim's tower galleries by the curator Katherine Brinson.) Old furniture reworked to suggest broken and mended bodies is a Salcedo signature; in one room here, the conjoined halves of mismatched tables are sheathed in gauze that's been stitched with human hair, an effect that's both repellent and spectral. Salcedo's labor-intensive art can be seen as a form of public grieving—modern memorials for a repressive and bloody age. Through Oct. 12.

New-York Historical Society "Picasso's 'Le Tricorne'"

It's still hard to believe that the Four Seasons restaurant will close in less than a year. But the modernist sanctuary has already lost its stateliest occupant: a curtain, painted by Picasso, in 1919, for a Diaghilev ballet, depicting caricatured Spaniards in a classicized bullring, which hung between the Grill Room and the Pool Room for decades. Hardly a masterpiece, the curtain nevertheless charms; note the simplified bull's head and the still-life with sherry bottle. At the museum, a recording of

the Paris Opera Ballet's swashbuckling "Tricorne" gives the piece some context, as do loans, from the Hispanic Society, of works by El Greco and Goya. But much of the other material here is tangential at best, such as the seventeenth-century Flemish tableau of backgammon-playing monkeys. Through the summer of 2016.

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

James Lee Byars

For viewers who are on the fence about this self-mythologizing American artist, who died, in 1997, in Cairo, the brace of marble sculptures here offers a chance to see Byars at his most Apollonian and least indulgent. A stack of ten cubes, taxed with the title "The Figure of Death," has the austere magnetism of an Alpine massif. A concave, eight-foot-tall totem in the shape of a half-moon conveys the simplicity and solemnity that Byars always aimed for but, with his gold lamé suits and shamanistic insinuations, too often failed to achieve. Through Sept. 3. (Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623.)

"Paris Holiday"

The New York outpost of a Parisian gallery pays group-show homage to its home town. There's a picture of Sophie Calle, looking fabulous in a white nightgown on the top of the Eiffel Tower, in 2002, when she spent the night there and invited strangers to read her bedtime stories. For another photograph, taken this summer, Paola Pivi brought horses to the Tower, where they reared up under its iron struts. But not every work here is so amiable. On the sixtieth anniversary of D Day, while George W. Bush was in Normandy, Gianni Motti sat at the French Open with a bag over his head, an Abu Ghraib prisoner transferred to Roland Garros. Through Aug. 21. (Galerie

Perrotin, 909 Madison Ave., at 73rd St. 212-812-2902.)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

"A Rare Earth Magnet"

A prime wrapped-yarn piece by Judith Scott sets the tone for this show of works by artists who make use of found and unprecious objects. Unfortunately, too many aim for easy laughs. Adam Parker Smith's wall-mounted sculpture is a Frank Stella parody, made of jump rope and faux-marble wallpaper. Ajay Kurian has rigged a linear actuator to compress and decompress the belly of one of this summer's ubiquitous Minions. Better is the work of Ann Greene Kelly, whose assemblages of repurposed materials—an upturned stool and a mop head, a shoe tree mounted precariously on a steel rod—have some of the inscrutable appeal of Scott's confounding creations. Through Aug. 21. (Eller, 615 W. 27th St. 212-206-6411.)

"Soul-Lit Shadows: Masterpieces of Civil War Photography"

The word "masterpiece" overstates what's on view, but this big, affecting show, drawn from three private collections, is well worth a visit. Battlefield photographs by Alexander Gardner, Matthew Brady, and Timothy O'Sullivan and images of President Lincoln and various Confederate and Union generals are attended by hundreds of small portraits of anonymous soldiers and civilians, preserved in formats from tintypes to stereo views, as well as tucked into lockets, brooches, and pendants. Thanks, in part, to the show's exclusion of Confederate-battle-flag images, what comes across is a sense of a common, complicated humanity. Through Aug. 21. (Milk, 450 W. 15th St. 212-645-2797.)



Martha Graham Dance Company / "Embattled Garden"

Since moving into its beautiful new space at Westbeth—formerly Merce Cunningham's headquarters—the company has made use of the expansive penthouse studio

for informal and often revelatory showings of a single Graham work. (The company calls these evenings GrahamDeconstructed.) In "Embattled Garden," from 1958, Graham—a lover of myth—tackled the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. (The garden is represented by a rather prickly looking field of reeds, designed by Isamu Noguchi). Graham's approach is forceful and rife with symbolism, and characteristically straightforward in its handling of female sexual desire. (155 Bethune St. 212-229-9200, ext. 14. Aug. 19.)

Battery Dance Festival

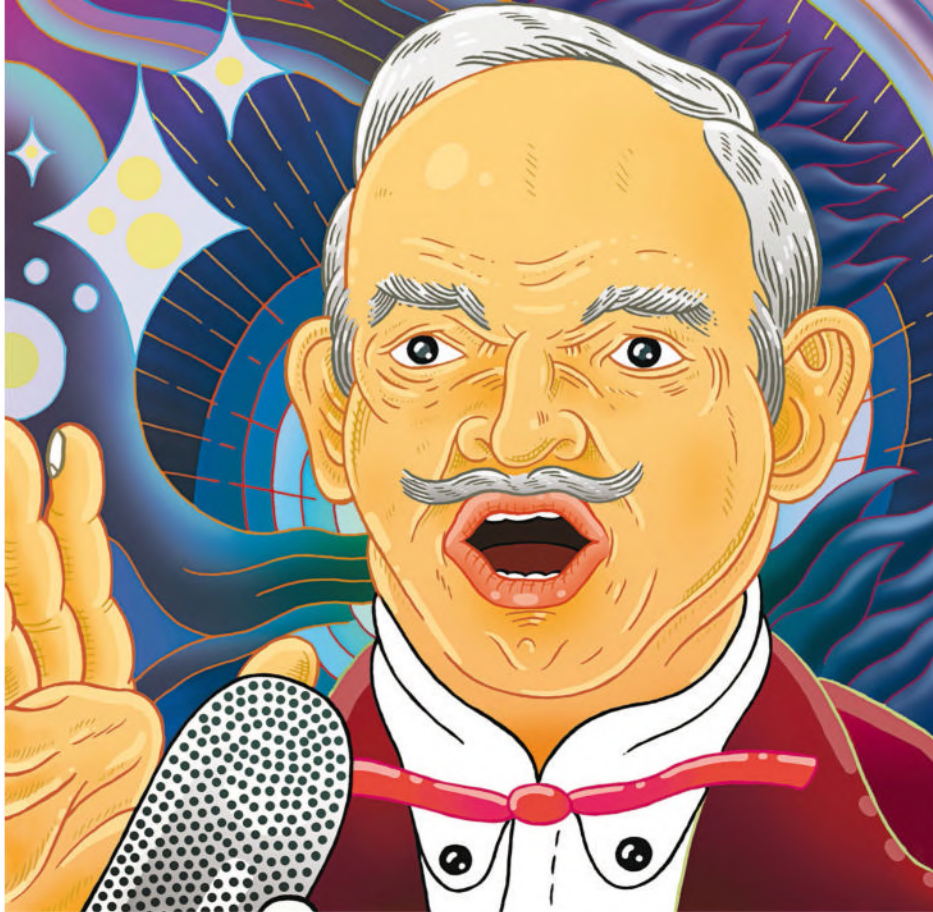
The free festival, organized by Battery Dance Company, closes with

two more shows against the bright backdrop of New York Harbor. These programs mingle little-known choreographers with such mid-list veterans as Jacquelyn Buglisi and Jennifer Muller. On Aug. 21, the proceedings move indoors, to Pace University's Schimmel Center (at 3 Spruce St.), where the Norwegian company Ingun Bjørnsgaard Prosjekt (which makes its American debut earlier in the festival) presents the fragmented and stagy "Praelambulum." It shares the evening with the festival's host troupe, as well as with the bharatanatyam dancer Shanmugha Sundaram. (Robert F. Wagner, Jr., Park, 20 Battery Park Pl. 212-219-3910. Aug. 19-21.)

OUT OF TOWN

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Benjamin Millepied (at the Ted Shawn) may now be devoting most of his time to directing the Paris Opera Ballet, but his L.A. Dance Project is still going strong. The dancers are captivating, and the repertoire is usually intriguing, as in this program, which includes Justin Peck's gripping "Murder Ballades," Roy Assaf's daft "II Acts for the Blind," and Millepied's skillful, protean "Hearts and Arrows." • Liz Gerring (at the Doris Duke), the winner of this year's Jacob's Pillow dance award, presents her engrossing 2013 work "Glacier." Coolly analytical in tone, it has a deceptively plain surface, but its kinetic impact is significant. (Becket, Mass. 413-243-0745. Aug. 19-23.)



HIS ROYAL HIPNESS

"Dig Infinity!," at the Fringe Festival, celebrates the profound comedy of Lord Buckley.

I FIRST HEARD THE POET and comedian Lord Buckley's sui-generis, incredible music-as-talk during a dance performance by Karole Armitage. This was a number of years ago, but sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can still see one of Armitage's impossibly long legs lifting and extending in front of a David Salle backdrop as Buckley's recorded voice fills the theatre. It was the perfect soundtrack to Armitage's electric and cool world, where movement happened very slowly, or very fast. Later, I learned that the Buckley piece was called "Subconscious Mind," and that it was just one example of the California-born artist's unique blend of hipster slang mixed with jazz's erratic, smooth rhythm.

As a child, Richard Myrle Buckley (1906-1960) performed on the street with his sister. Going on to m.c. at dance marathons in Chicago and elsewhere, he developed a persona—a "Lord" who had an aristocratic bearing, sported a wax mustache, and sometimes wore a pith helmet. (Buckley's English parents no doubt contributed to his stage character, along with jazz royalty like Duke Ellington and Lester (Prez) Young.) Sometimes backed by a small combo, Buckley emitted various sounds—he whistled or imitated a horn—that complemented his monologues. No matter what his effects, though, Buckley's genius always felt as though it were coming from a real place, somewhere underground, where cats and chicks wore berets and argued about existentialism with musicians and painters who didn't know there was another eleven o'clock in the day. Instead of delivering the usual Shakespeare jive—"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears"—Buckley would say, in his gravelly voice, "Hipsters, flipsters, and finger-poppin' daddies: knock me your lobes." In "Subconscious Mind," he takes us on a deep journey about being with the right lady—if she exists. How would we know? What appears to be real is in part created by our imagination.

Lord Buckley was an amazing self-creation, a white man who made a beautiful show of black jazz styles, and his life and work are being commemorated and examined in "Dig Infinity!" (at the New York International Fringe Festival, through Aug. 27). Starring the writer and performer Oliver Trager, the play is drawn in part from Trager's 2002 book of the same title. (The book is a gasser: well researched, respectful, comprehensive.) In the nearly hour-and-a-half-long piece, Trager talks a lot of dreamy mess with Orpheus and God while doing what Buckley did best: putting the humor back into jazz without losing any of the genre's free-fall feeling.

—Hilton Als



THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

The Legend of Georgia McBride

MCC begins its season with a comedy by Matthew Lopez, directed by Mike Donahue, about an Elvis impersonator at a Florida dive bar who loses his spot to a drag show. Previews begin Aug. 20. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-352-3101.)

Love and Money

Mark Lamos directs A. R. Gurney's play, in which a wealthy widow plans to give away everything she owns, until a young man shows up to claim his inheritance. In previews. Opens Aug. 24. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

Mercury Fur

In Philip Ridley's play, set in a dystopian near-future, two teenage brothers throw parties for the rich in abandoned buildings. Scott Elliott directs for the New Group. Opens Aug. 19. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

The New Morality

In Jonathan Bank's revival of the Harold Chapin comedy, first produced in 1920, a woman on a houseboat on the Thames watches as her husband flirts with a neighbor. Previews begin Aug. 22. (Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 866-811-4111.)

NOW PLAYING

Cymbeline

Two gilded frames hover over Daniel Sullivan's winning production, the summer's second Shakespeare in the Park offering, signalling that the director has embraced the play's twisty artificiality. Shakespeare's late romance is a mishmash of familiar plot devices—misconceived jealousy, women disguised as boys, potions that make the heroine seem dead—rolled up into a convoluted frolic. Sullivan plays it all for giggles, with actors doubling up on roles



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and nutty musical numbers by Tom Kitt. Fortunately, the cast is on the same crazy wavelength. Lily Rabe, the Delacorte's go-to leading lady, plays Imogen as a princess with a sour side. Hamish Linklater brings gangly charm to both the goofus Cloten and the gallant Posthumus. Throw in Raúl Esparza as a Vegas high roller and Kate Burton as an evil queen, and the contrived plot plays like a giddy shaggy-dog story. (Central Park. Enter at 81st St. at Central Park W. 212-967-7555. Through Aug. 23.)

Hamilton

In a way, this show makes even more sense on Broadway. After a wildly successful—indeed, historic—run at the Public, earlier this year, the groundbreaking musical about the rise, fall, and death of the Founding Father Alexander Hamilton (played with verve by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who also wrote the book, music, and lyrics) now has a larger stage and a

bigger house in which to celebrate its particular brilliance. Miraculously, none of the orchestrations or performances have got “big” for the move to Broadway, and that’s a good thing: you can hear the lyrics without excessive amplification. Still, the second act is not as strong as the first, and Miranda relies on familiar tropes to keep the thing going—all ending with a view of Heaven. But it’s worth seeing just the same, because it really does beat a new path for the American musical, and, boy, did the form need it. (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 800-745-3000.)

John

Sam Gold directs a new play by Annie Baker (“The Flick”). (Reviewed in this issue.) (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

The New York International Fringe Festival

Each year, this festival sprawls across

downtown Manhattan like a theatrical crazy quilt, a loosely stitched assemblage of tradition and avant-garde, poor-theatre seriousness and low-budget pizzazz. With nearly two hundred shows on offer, how do you choose? The best bets are often the oddest—devised works, curious solo plays, wildly sophomoric musicals. Shows and companies that have gone beyond the Fringe (“Matt and Ben,” “Urinetown,” Radiohole, PigPen, the monologues of Mike Daisey) typically belong to those categories. Straight plays are frequently a miss (though every so often they yield a Jenny Schwartz), and revivals are almost always a dull calamity. If you can’t guarantee success, you might as well select the show that will be the most fun to describe over drinks—whether it’s a fiasco or a triumph. Possibilities this year: “Beware the Chupacabra!,” “The Curious Case of Phineas Gage,” “Hamlet the Hip-Hopera.” (Various locations. fringenyc.org.)

Summer Shorts 2015

Program B of 59E59’s series of one-act plays feels like the writing-workshop cast-offs of usually interesting playwrights: oddly unconvincing scenarios, lumps of undigested exposition. In Lucy Thurber’s “Unstuck,” the birthday boy Pete (Alfredo Narciso) is repeatedly told that he’s having an emotional crisis, until he finally has one. Robert O’Hara’s “Built”—with shades of “Notes on a Scandal”—stages the confrontation between an ex-high-school teacher and her former student, ten years after their affair ruined her life and changed the course of his. Stella Fawn Ragsdale’s “Love Letters to a Dictator” takes the prize for least-probable premise: a young Appalachian artist (Colby Minifie) conducts an epistolary relationship with Kim Jong Il in the months before his death, resulting in emotional discoveries on both sides. Alas, none of the plays offer discoveries, emotional or otherwise, for the spectators. (59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)



ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Afropunk Fest

No longer focussed exclusively on African-Americans in punk, this annual festival highlights a wide range of music genres. The lineup includes the guitar-rock superstar **Lenny Kravitz**, the ex-Fugees golden-larynxed recluse **Lauryl Hill**, the high-energy Detroit rapper **Danny Brown**, and the influential California hardcore punk band **Suicidal Tendencies**. This year, the first annual Afropunk Fancy Dress Ball kicks things off the night before the festival, with the Jamaican-born entertainer **Grace Jones**, and others, to raise money for the Afropunk Global Initiative, an effort to encourage diversity in media. (Commodore Barry Park, Nassau St. bet. Navy St. and N. Elliott Pl., Brooklyn. afropunkfest.com. Aug. 21-23.)

Blackalicious and Kool Keith

A double-headed night of classic

hip-hop. The Sacramento duo Blackalicious, which has been perfecting its poetic and complex craft for nearly two decades, played a large part in steering old-school rap from slow monosyllabic call-and-response to the fast-paced, cerebral art that is practiced by many indie m.c.s today. The duo is touring on part one of its promised musical trilogy, “Imani Vol. 1,” due out September. Blackalicious’s counterpart Kool Keith made his name with his unrelenting wit and the strength of his verbal imagery. First-time listeners may be shocked by his scatological and hyper-sexual leanings, but there are many facets to Kool Keith’s work, including the surreal (during his Dr. Octagon incarnation), the depraved (notably on his LP “Sex Style”), and the socially conscious (in his recent collaboration with Wu Tang Clan’s Inspectah Deck). (Brooklyn Bowl, 61 Wythe Ave., Williamsburg. brooklynbowl.com. Aug. 20.)

Mac DeMarco

This gap-toothed rocker is known for putting on crazy shows. He once stripped naked and shoved a drumstick up his butt while covering U2’s “Beautiful Day.” But don’t let the frat-boy antics fool you—underneath the beer-chugging, fart-joke-cracking, goofball exterior is a seasoned, skilled, and sensitive songwriter. The twenty-five-year-old troubadour crafts breezy, seventies-style pop that is deceptively laid-back and fiercely witty. His new release, “Another One,” is the follow-up to his 2014 breakthrough album, “Salad Days,” and, though it’s only twenty-four minutes long, its misty melodies can get stuck in your head for days. (Aug. 17: Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-533-2111. Aug. 19: Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66

N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. Aug. 20: Warsaw, 261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn. 718-387-0505.)

Melody’s Echo Chamber

This project of the French singer-songwriter Melody Prochet combines elements of dream-pop and psych-rock, propelled to heavenly heights by an angelic falsetto and heaps of reverb. Though Prochet wrote all the songs on her 2012 debut, the album was produced by Tame Impala’s Kevin Parker, and features the type of shimmering fuzz and scuzz he’s become famous for. The chanteuse has said that a sophomore LP is on its way, and last fall she released the first single from it, the self-produced “Shirim,” a vaporous and grooving number that is perhaps her most enjoyable work to date. (Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. Aug. 25.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Geri Allen

A sterling modernist pianist who passionately values the jazz tradition, Allen demonstrates her commitment to weaving together the past and the present in her trio, which features the bassist **Kenny Davis** and the eighty-six-year-old drummer **Jimmy Cobb**, the last surviving contributor to Miles Davis’s epochal recording “Kind of Blue.” (Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Aug. 18-23.)

Andy Bey

This jazz legend takes his time and then some, singing songs and accompanying himself on piano with a slow and steady intensity that, if surrendered to, can offer a near-cathartic experience. His latest album, “Pages from an Imaginary

Life,” which came out last fall, blends affecting originals and well-worn standards (“My Foolish Heart,” “Love For Sale”). (Mezzrow, 163 W. 10th St. mezzrow.com. Aug. 21-22.)

Brooklyn Jazz Underground Festival

The current D.I.Y. musical environment has fostered its share of local jazz collectives, few of which are more resilient than this Kings County-based organization. This week, its doggedly individual bands, including the **David Cook** quintet, the **Rob Garcia 4**, the **Tammy Scheffer** sextet, and the **Brooklyn Jazz Underground Ensemble**, take the stage at Smalls, in Manhattan, and at the Shapeshifter Lab, in the collective’s namesake borough. (brooklynjazz.org. Aug. 19-20.)

Joe Lovano Us Five

The saxophonist’s ensemble may no longer feature the dynamic bassist Esperanza Spalding, but with two drummers prodding and poking there’s more than enough polyrhythmic energy onstage. Surrounded by younger players, Lovano, with his boundless vitality and improvisational smarts, remains the engine powering this battleship of a band. (Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. Aug. 18-22.)

Charlie Parker Jazz Festival

Holding to the spirit rather than to the letter of bebop, this long-running festival presents a mélange of stylistically diverse jazz artists at uptown and downtown venues. Friday and Saturday concerts at Marcus Garvey Park, in Harlem, feature the **Oliver Lake Big Band**, **Andy Bey**, **Camille Thurman**, and others; Sunday’s Tomkins Square Park event includes **Joe Lovano**, **Rudresh Mahanthappa**, and **Michael Mwenso**. (cityparksfoundation.org. Aug. 21-23.)



Bergman, in 1953, when she was married to and working with the director Roberto Rossellini.

MOVIES

Germany itself, its rigorously rational order built on frenzied concealment and the fear of crimes revealed. Utterly in her element as the free-spirited but besieged executive, Bergman lends Irene a frozen and fractured stillness. Irene, contemplating suicide, calmly dusts, with one finger, between the buttons of her office telephone, a touch of actorly genius that intimates the grandeur of her passions.

Soon after making “Fear,” Bergman and Rossellini separated, largely because she insisted on making movies with other directors. The first of them, Jean Renoir’s effervescent comedy “Elena and Her Men” (MOMA, Aug. 31 and Sept. 6), from 1956, has as its subject the successive affairs of a woman who is both muse and enchantress. Bergman plays the worldly Polish princess Elena Sokorowska, whose self-appointed mission is to help men realize their destinies—which she sees more clearly than they do. Set in fin-de-siècle Paris, the story—built on tensions between France and Germany and a general’s plan for a coup d’état—revisits scenes from the director’s prewar classic “The Rules of the Game,” as well as from “Notorious,” fusing Bergman’s bold and graceful romanticism with the upheavals of history.

—Richard Brody

A LIFE OF HER OWN

Celebrating Ingrid Bergman’s centenary onscreen.

INGRID BERGMAN EXCELLED AT PLAYING strong-willed, independent-minded women; she herself was one, and she paid a higher price for her artistic ambition and personal freedom than did any other movie star. Her centenary is being celebrated in retrospectives at MOMA (Aug. 29–Sept. 10) and BAM Cinémathèque (Sept. 12–29), which feature her greatest films (including all those mentioned here) and her most infamous ones—and some that manage to be both.

In her early years in Hollywood, Bergman was directed by such luminaries as George Cukor (“Gaslight”) and Alfred Hitchcock (the thrillers “Spellbound” and “Notorious,” and the Gothic-erotic drama “Under Capricorn”). In 1948, she wrote to the innovative Italian director Roberto Rossellini and offered to work with him. Bergman had a child with Rossellini while they were filming in Italy, and before divorcing her then-husband, sparking denunciations of her in the press, and even the Senate, as well as officials’ demands for a ban on her movies. Although Bergman went from heroine to pariah, her artistry rose to new heights. Rossellini directed her in four of the harshest and most insightful movies ever made about marriage: “Stromboli,” “Europa ’51,” “Voyage to Italy,” and the last and rarest of them, “Fear,” from 1954 (screening at MOMA Sept. 4 and Sept. 9).

“Fear” is set in Munich, where Irene Wagner (Bergman), an adept businesswoman, runs a pharmaceutical company founded by her husband, Albert (Mathias Wieman), who is its chief scientist. Irene is having an affair with a playboy whose ex-lover, the showgirl Johanna (Renate Mannhardt), turns up and blackmails her, threatening to inform Albert of the affair if Irene doesn’t pay her off. As Johanna ratchets up her demands, Irene tells Albert ever more complex lies to explain sudden absences, requests for money, and missing pieces of jewelry. Under increasing strain, Irene is pressed to the breaking point. Rossellini likens the Wagners’ private torments to the tensions within

OPENING

AMERICAN ULTRA

An action comedy, starring Jesse Eisenberg as a stoner secret agent. Directed by Nima Nourizadeh; co-starring Kristen Stewart and Topher Grace. Opening Aug. 21. (In wide release.)

DIGGING FOR FIRE

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Aug. 19. (In limited release.)

GRANDMA

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Aug. 21. (In limited release.)

HITMAN: AGENT 47

Rupert Friend stars in this science-fiction thriller, as a bioengineered killer. Directed by Aleksander Bach; co-starring Hannah Ware and Zachary Quinto. Opening Aug. 21. (In wide release.)

THE MEND

A drama, directed by John Magary, starring Josh Lucas as a drifter who moves into his brother's Brooklyn apartment. Co-starring Stephen Plunkett, Mickey Sumner, and Austin Pendleton. Opening Aug. 21. (In limited release.)

SHE'S FUNNY THAT WAY

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Aug. 21. (In limited release.)

REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

Titles in bold are reviewed.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

"One-Film Wonders." Aug. 19 at 7: "Carnival of Souls" (1962, Herk Harvey). • Aug. 19 at 9: "Spring Night, Summer Night" (1967, J. L. Anderson). • "American International Pictures." Aug. 21 at 8: "X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes" (1963, Roger Corman). • Aug. 22 at 4:30: "Panic in Year Zero!" (1962, Ray Milland). • Aug. 23 at 3:15: "The Amazing Colossal Man." • Aug. 23 at 7:15: "I Was a Teenage Werewolf" (1957, Gene Fowler, Jr.). • Aug. 24 at 7: "The Time Travelers" (1964, Ib Melchior). • Aug. 24 at 9: "The Last Man on Earth" (1964, Ubaldo Ragana and Sidney Salkow). • Aug. 25 at 9: "Burn, Witch, Burn" (1962, Sidney Hayers). • "Essential Cinema." Aug. 22 at 6: Short silent films by Buster Keaton, including "The Haunted House" (1921).

NOW PLAYING

The Amazing Colossal Man

The pulp sublime reaches mad heights in this hectic, outrageous science-fiction drama, from 1957. Colonel Glenn Manning (Glen Langan) is horribly burned in a plutonium-bomb test in Nevada, but he doesn't die. Instead, the radiation makes his skin quickly heal and causes his whole body to grow, turning him into a giant. Glenn's fiancée, Carol (Cathy Downs), finds him in a hangar-like facility, where he seethes with rage at his new life as a freak. Glenn continues to grow in size, but—lacking sufficient blood supply to his brain and tormented by nightmares from his combat duty in the Korean War—he also turns demented. Breaking out of the facility, he rampages through Las Vegas, smashing hotel windows on high floors and hurling trees and cars at gawkers. Meanwhile, a scientist comes up with an antidote and plans to give him the world's biggest injection. The director, Bert I. Gordon, surrounds Langan with tiny furniture to conjure the gigantic illusion; stark optical effects place Glenn beside Carol, with forced perspectives conveying their monstrous disproportion. A showdown at Boulder Dam evokes the romantic terror of "King Kong" with a Cold War twist.—*Richard Brody* (Anthology Film Archives; Aug. 23, Aug. 28, and Sept. 1.)

Ant-Man

The title may suggest a daunting genetic fusion of ant and man, but Peyton Reed's film, the latest entry in the Marvel series, declines to venture into the wilder limits of antsiness. Rather, it's about a clever scientist (Michael Douglas) who once came up with an invention so wondrous—a suit that shrinks its wearer to the size of an insect—that he kept it tucked away. Now, decades later, he gets a clever burglar (Paul Rudd) to steal it, try it on, and do battle with a clever corporate villain (Corey Stoll), who has devised something similar and plans to market it as a weapon. Despite the characters' soaring levels of intelligence, the plot is lumpy and dumb, and Reed can do little but obey its stolid demands. Rudd, on the other hand, makes an endearing hero, and, to be fair, the climax is sprinkled with decent sight gags; by Marvel's standards, two tiny guys duking it out atop a toy train makes a refreshing change from saving the world.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 7/27/15.) (In wide release.)

Best of Enemies

In 1968, ABC, eager to boost its coverage of the Republican and Democratic Conventions, hired Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley, Jr., to meet on air and discuss the issues of the day. If this was intended to be a calm and cultivated affair between gentlemen of the left and the right,

things did not go as planned. The syntax and phrase-coining of their exchanges were of a nicety that verged on preciousness, but the atmosphere, from the start, was closer to that of a dogfight. Everything peaked when Buckley, riled by the snapping jibes of his opponent, offered to sock him in the jaw. Needless to say, the ratings rose accordingly, and, if we are to believe this documentary, directed by Morgan Neville and Robert Gordon, the art of belligerent punditry was born. The movie feels too busy for its own good, often cutting away to more recent commentaries and inflating these brief encounters between the two men—all part of their lifelong and exhausting enmity—to the status of a legend. Some viewers may see them as servants less of their political principles than of their own reputations; others will regard them as the remnants of an endangered species.—*A.L.* (8/10 & 17/15) (In wide release.)

The Diary of a Teenage Girl

The writer and director Marielle Heller takes a sentimental swing at a tough-minded subject, the sexual awakening of a young woman. The action is set in San Francisco in 1976, where the fifteen-year-old Minnie Goetze (played by Bel Powley), who is ardently eager for sexual experience, initiates an affair with her mother's boyfriend, Monroe (Alexander Skarsgård), who's thirty-four. Pursuing the relationship with reckless enthusiasm, Minnie follows her desires wherever they lead her, including into flings with classmates, a one-time attempt at prostitution, and an affair with a young woman living in a drug-hazy crash pad. Despite voice-over from Minnie's copious audio diary (which she records on a cassette deck) and animated versions of her drawings, the movie never gets close to her inner life. How she—and, for that matter, how Heller—feels about the action onscreen remains unclear and unexpressed. Minnie flaunts her indifference to the world's judgment, yet the movie seems to beg for the viewers' love. Under Heller's direction, Powley performs with a disingenuously ingratiating cuteness. Sex is presented without physical intimacy or emotional complexity, without risk or mess; it's neatly packaged for sale. With Kristen Wiig, as Minnie's mother.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

Digging for Fire

Tensions below the surface of a happy couple's life come to the fore in Joe Swanberg's tender, wildly imaginative comic drama. Tim (Jake Johnson), a public-school teacher; Lee (Rosemary DeWitt), a yoga instructor; and their toddler son, Jude (Jude Swanberg, the director's son), spend a weekend in a luxurious house belonging to one of her clients. Scratching around on the hilly property, Tim digs up a gun and a human bone, and wants

to dig further. Lee brings Jude to her mother's house and plans a night on the town with a friend (Melanie Lynskey), leaving Tim to plow through a pile of receipts and do their taxes. Instead, Tim invites some guys over, and they bring some girls, and everyone gets in on the excavation. The exuberantly crisscrossing story (co-written by Swanberg and Johnson), involving drugs, alcohol, fights, and flirtations, captures the mixed emotions of marriage and parenthood, with conflicts between love and frustration, devotion and constraint, threatening to tear apart a well-matched pair. Refreshing life by considering death, renewing romance in the face of violence, Swanberg offers symbolic nods to the land of film noir. Co-starring Brie Larson, Anna Kendrick, Orlando Bloom, Mike Birbiglia, and a host of other surprising, distinctive presences.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

The End of the Tour

The author David Lipsky (Jesse Eisenberg) learns, to his dismay, that David Foster Wallace (Jason Segel) has died. This prompts him to unearth old tapes, recorded when he interviewed the novelist—who had recently published "Infinite Jest"—some years before. The bulk of James Ponsoldt's movie consists of a flashback to that time. Little of it is rich in drama; we solemnly follow Lipsky as he flies to Illinois, rents a car, and arrives at the novelist's home. The two of them discover a mutual taste for junk food, but their brief rapport falls well short of friendship. There is a scratchy abrasiveness (ideal for Eisenberg's demeanor) in Lipsky's envy of the other man, while Wallace's wavering attitude to the literary life—which he views both as the holiest of callings and, as, really, no big deal—leaves his interlocutor frustrated. Other figures intrude (not least Joan Cusack, as Wallace's effusive Minneapolis escort), but the film is in essence a two-hander, condensing to a troubling one-hander, as Segel holds the screen. He lends charm to Wallace but stops wisely short of making him easy to like. Although we learn next to nothing of the author's work, the compulsions that drove it and the gasping grabs at happiness that flickered through it are there to behold in the actor's fine performance.—*A.L.* (8/10 & 17/15) (In wide release.)

Fantastic Four

There's inspired madness and authentic sweetness in the director Josh Trank's adaptation of this Marvel Comics property. Trank traces the band of heroes back to the precocious elementary-school exploits of Reed Richards, a science whiz, and Ben Grimm, a junk-yard scion. In high school, Reed (Miles Teller) and Ben (Jamie Bell) build a teleportation device that works too well, sending

living creatures into extra dimensions and parallel worlds. The collegiate Reed perfects his invention in collaboration with Johnny Storm (Michael B. Jordan), Sue Storm (Kate Mara), and the envious Victor Von Doom (Toby Kebbell). Unfortunately, much screen time is wasted on a villainous bureaucrat (Tim Blake Nelson), who wants to militarize the wondrous invention against the wishes of Reed's benefactor (Reg E. Cathey). The excess plot distracts from Trank's relaxed, warm-hearted observation of the teens at work, as well as from his furious, terrified view of science gone wrong. When the youths are transformed into superheroes with unnatural powers, their new bodies—especially the rocky horror of Ben, now *The Thing*—inaugurate new psychic dimensions along with new adventures, which Trank films with an exhilarating visual imagination.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

Grandma

Lily Tomlin shines as the cantankerous, combative, brutally frank poet Elle Reid, now fallen into literary silence after the death of her partner of thirty-eight years. Elle breaks up with a new, much younger girlfriend named Olivia (Judy Greer), but her uncreative solitude is disturbed by the arrival of her teen-age granddaughter, Sage (Julia Garner), who is pregnant and has an appointment for an abortion that very day, but no money to pay for it. Neither does Elle, who, as a result, packs Sage into her old car and goes on a local odyssey through her circle of acquaintances, past and present, in quest of the funds. The tightly constructed small-scale comic drama, written and directed by Paul Weitz, puts Elle face to face with a lifetime of bittersweet memories, involving the transgender tattoo artist Deathy (Laverne Cox) and Karl (Sam Elliott), the man whom Elle left when she came out as a lesbian. But Weitz leaches the tough situations of emotional difficulty; the sentimental drama is a superhero movie for liberals. Elle's faux crustiness gleams with her heart of gold, and the movie's heroes and villains line up as obviously as in a blockbuster.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

I Walked with a Zombie

The producer Val Lewton specialized in economical and literate horror movies. But on its own small scale, this tensile mood piece from 1943—about love, revenge, and voodoo—is extravagantly lyrical. A riff on Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre" which prefigures Jean Rhys's "Wide Sargasso Sea," it stars Frances Dee as a Canadian nurse who takes a job tending the ambulatory yet mentally dead wife (Christine Gordon) of a West Indian plantation owner (Tom Conway). Lewton's screenwriters, Curt Siodmak and Ardel Wray, knew how to make the occult and psychological converge, and the

director, Jacques Tourneur, a master at orchestrating shadowy and suggestive forms, gave supernatural doings the force of poetic justice.—*Michael Sragow* (MOMA; Aug. 22 and Aug. 25.)

Listen to Me Marlon

The director Stevan Riley gained access to an inestimable treasure: hundreds of hours of Marlon Brando's unpublished homemade audio recordings of himself, spoken into the microphone of a tape recorder over the course of decades. Riley edits the recordings into something like Brando's posthumous self-portrait. The actor's every turn of phrase is a ready-made work of art, an intimate performance for the ages. Unfortunately, Riley decorates these sonic gems nearly beyond recognition with audiovisual distractions, including a Max Headroom-like digital mockup of Brando, illustrative stock footage, and insipid reenactments, together with droning music and sound effects that intrude on Brando's voice. Riley doesn't trust the material; each time a tape is actually seen—including several that Brando labelled "self-hypnosis"—the sense of contact with the late actor is uncanny. Brando reflects on his contribution to the art of the movies; his view seems to shift over the years from pride to cynicism, but Riley doesn't identify the recordings by date. Rather, he melds them into a banal concoction that's unworthy of their source.—*R.B.* (Film Forum.)

Metropolitan

Whit Stillman's effervescent, calmly profound first feature, from 1990, looks at a sliver of a sliver, the barely collegiate subset of what one character calls the urban haute bourgeoisie—rich Wasp preppies whose lives are centered on Park and Fifth Avenues. The tale is told from the perspective of a near-outsider, Tom Townsend (Edward Clements), a red-haired, Ivy-styled intellectual who, after his parents' divorce, lives on the West Side without a trust fund and must make an impression with his ideas. Swept accidentally into the Christmas-season wave of debutante balls, Tom becomes the habitual escort of Audrey Rouget (Carolyn Farina) but hasn't got over a prep-school fling with Serena Slocum (Elizabeth Thompson), whose new Euro-trash boyfriend (Will Kempe) becomes a subject of controversy. Stillman films these rounds of romance and jealousy, old mind-sets and new friendships, as scintillating dialectical jousts in which verbal blows take the place of action and leave lasting emotional wounds. His sensitive cinematic balance of performance, image, and inflection suggests a sensibility inspired, worthily, by F. Scott Fitzgerald.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation

A franchise that was starting to sag has recovered its buoyancy and zip,

thanks to the writer and director Christopher McQuarrie. As a plotter, he is finicky to a fault, and this tale is a tangle of uncertain loyalties; as a filmmaker, he adheres firmly to the primacy of the set piece and the preternatural stamina of his star. Notable sights include Tom Cruise clinging to the outside of an airplane, Tom Cruise holding his breath for an underwater theft, and Tom Cruise, devoid of both fear and helmet, gunning his motorbike around hairpin bends. His character, Ethan Hunt, is pursuing Ilsa Faust (Rebecca Ferguson), determined to find out if she is with him or against him. Ferguson, amused and unbreakable, is more than a match for Cruise, and a fine addition to the ranks; she outpaces Ving Rhames, Simon Pegg, and Jeremy Renner, all of whom return as Ethan's pals. The rogues of the title refers to the Syndicate, a near-mythical outfit headed by Solomon Lane (Sean Harris) and dedicated to global disarray. But Ethan's own team, too, is forced to go rogue, disowned by the C.I.A. The movie subsides toward the end, but not before delivering its payload of thrills. With Alec Baldwin.—*A.L.* (8/10 & 17/15) (In wide release.)

Mr. Holmes

The Sherlock Holmes industry shows no sign of withering, but the man himself, according to Bill Condon's movie, was all too subject to the corrosive powers of time. The guiding conceit is that Holmes was a real person whose deeds were transcribed by Dr. Watson; the need for Conan Doyle thus evaporates. The film opens in 1947, at a time when the aging Holmes (Ian McKellen), recently returned from Japan, is cared for by his housekeeper (Laura Linney) and her young son (Milo Parker); in contrast to the look of the movie, which is decorous to a fault, Holmes is aggravated by the memory of an old case, from thirty years earlier, when he was asked to explain the curious conduct of a mother (Hattie Morahan) in mourning for her dead children. The heart of the tale is a finely wrought encounter between the sleuth and his prey, yet the central mystery feels, by Holmesian standards, barely worth unravelling. Much of the rest of the film, for some reason, is about bees.—*A.L.* (7/20/15) (In limited release.)

Phoenix

The German director Christian Petzold's drama, a historical twist on Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo," stars Nina Hoss as Nelly Lenz, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, who suffers gunshot wounds to the face in the last days of the war. After facial-reconstruction surgery, she returns home to Berlin and finds her husband, Johannes (Johnny) Lenz (Ronald Zehrfeld), a pianist, working at a night club in the American sector. She doesn't identify

BAM CINÉMATEK

"Indie 80s." Aug. 19 at 7: "My Degeneration" (1989, Jon Moritsugu). • Aug. 19 at 8:30: "Who Killed Vincent Chin?" (1987, Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña). • Aug. 21 at 2, 4:30, and 9:30: "Evil Dead" (1981, Sam Raimi). • Aug. 21 at 7: "Wild Style" (1982, Charlie Ahearn). • Aug. 22 at 2 and 7: "Roger and Me" (1989, Michael Moore). • Aug. 22 at 4:30 and 9:30: "My Dinner with Andre" (1981, Louis Malle). • Aug. 23 at 2, 7, and 9:30: "She's Gotta Have It" (1986, Spike Lee). • Aug. 24 at 7:30: "Personal Problems" (1980, Bill Gunn). • Aug. 25 at 4:30 and 7: "Say Amen, Somebody" (1982, George T. Nierenberg).

FILM FORUM

In revival. Aug. 19 at 12:30, 2:20, 4:40, 7, and 9:15 and Aug. 20-25 at 12:30, 2:20, 4:20, 7, and 9:30: Short films by the Quay Brothers.

IFC CENTER

The films of Yasujiro Ozu. Aug. 21-23 at 11 A.M.: "Tokyo Twilight."

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"Scorsese Screens." Aug. 19 at 4:30: "La Ronde" (1950, Max Ophüls). • Aug. 19 at 7:45: "The Elusive Corporal" (1962, Jean Renoir). • Aug. 20 at 4: "Le Plaisir" (1952, Ophüls). • Aug. 20 at 7 and Aug. 23 at 2:30: "Léon Morin, Priest" (1961, Jean-Pierre Melville). • Aug. 21 at 4:30: "The Earrings of Madame de..." (1953, Ophüls). • Aug. 22 at 2:30 and Aug. 24 at 5: "Cat People" (1942, Jacques Tourneur). • Aug. 22 at 5 and Aug. 25 at 4:30: "I Walked with a Zombie." • Aug. 22 at 7:30: "The Leopard Man" (1943, Tourneur). • Aug. 23 and Aug. 24 at 8: "Eyes Without a Face" (1959, Georges Franju). • Aug. 25 at 7:30: "Gun Crazy" (1949, Joseph H. Lewis).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

"See It Big! 70mm." Aug. 22 at 2: "West Side Story" (1961, Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise). • Aug. 22 at 6 and Aug. 23 at 4: "Lawrence of Arabia" (1962, David Lean).

herself, and he doesn't recognize her; rather, he thinks that she resembles Nelly to the extent that, with a little effort, she could impersonate his late wife and claim her inheritance (since, as he knows, her entire family was killed by the Nazis). Petzold achieves a narrow but evocative realism on a slender budget, but the narrowness extends to his characters as well. His pristine academicism merely illustrates the story. The script's spoonfuls of dialogue take the place of visual conception and symbolic resonance; the lack of directorial style renders the story all the less plausible. Nonetheless, the plot tautly builds suspense, and the ending is a legitimate corker. In German.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

Ricki and the Flash

The title of the new Jonathan Demme film, written by Diablo Cody, refers to the house band at a bar in Tarzana, California. No longer in the flush of youth, they're popular with the patrons but blessed with no wider fame. The lead singer is Ricki (Meryl Streep), whose real name is Linda. Years ago, she left her husband, Pete (Kevin Kline), and their young children for rock's sake; now, learning that her daughter Julie—played by Streep's own daughter Mamie Gummer—has hit a rough patch, Linda flies to Indianapolis, where Pete and his wife, Maureen (Audra McDonald), lead a spotless life in a gated community. The film is burdened with some obvious setups—such as the rangy existence of the performing artist versus the

constraints of the rich stiff—and yet, against the odds, Demme delivers his most affable and dexterous work in a long while. We know that Linda will warm up the household and that music will exert its healing powers, but Demme is unrivalled at filming bands at play and at noticing the folks who listen and dance along, and Streep's part is worthy of her formidable gifts. Her singing has an edge of urgency to it and a secure hold on the emotional form of the movie. The happy ending, for once, feels thoroughly earned. With Rick Springfield.—*A.L.* (In wide release.)

She's Funny That Way

The rat-a-tat repartee and frantic gyrations of Peter Bogdanovich's neo-screwball comedy are an alluring front for his rueful, sordid observations of a life in art. It's the story of a famous director, Arnold Albertson (Owen Wilson), who has a secret: he sleeps with prostitutes and then gives them large sums of money to change their lives. The story is told from the perspective of one of them, Izzy Finkelstein (Imogen Poots), who uses the bounty to become an actress. She ends up auditioning for a Broadway drama that Arnold is directing, sparking crisscrossing ruses involving Arnold's wife, Delta (Kathryn Hahn); the co-star, Seth (Rhys Ifans); the playwright, Josh (Will Forte); his psychiatrist girlfriend, Jane (Jennifer Aniston); a judge (Austin Pendleton); and an elderly detective (George Morfogen). The clattery comedy seems borrowed from bits

and pieces of Hollywood classics (including Bogdanovich's own), but his vision depends more on behind-the-scenes Hollywood fleshpots: he reveals grotesque excesses of money and power, the arrogance of men and the subordination of women, and the deceptions and self-deceptions on which creative grandeur runs.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

Tokyo Twilight

This turbulent and grim family melodrama, from 1957, is steered away from the maudlin and given emotional depth and philosophical heft under the direction of Yasujiro Ozu. A respected businessman slowly awakens to the fact that his two grown daughters are unhappy in love. The elder, who entered into an arranged marriage with a respected intellectual (despite loving someone else), finds her husband overbearing and egocentric; the younger is running around with (and often running after) a dissolute student who neglects his studies for gambling. But as deeply buried family stories emerge—the father's long-concealed romantic humiliations, as well as wartime disruptions and degradations—it becomes clear that secrets themselves are the problem. Ozu reveals the emotional corrosion that results from maintaining a brave front when faced with problems and shielding children from darker issues—even those regarding their own past. By the movie's end, all Japanese society seems rotted out by the lies that pass for civility and propriety, and the ostensibly happy

ending offers little but resignation. In Japanese.—*R.B.* (IFC Center; Aug. 21-23.)

Trainwreck

After three successful seasons of "Inside Amy Schumer," its creator gets a starring role outside the realm of TV. Schumer plays Amy—a romantically reckless, dirty-mouthed, and alcohol-laced writer living, working, and sleeping around in New York. Aghast at the idea of seeing a guy more than once, let alone settling down, she is shocked to find herself falling for a sports surgeon (Bill Hader) whom she interviews for a magazine. Anyone hoping that the movie, written by Schumer and directed by Judd Apatow, would have the courage of its own waywardness, or that Amy might push her lonely transgressions to the limit, will be disappointed to watch the plot acquire the softness of a regular rom-com, and even Schumer's fiercest fans may wonder if they are still watching a bunch of funny sketches being strung together, as opposed to a feature film. There are sprightly supporting turns from Tilda Swinton, scarcely recognizable as an editor with a heart of flint, and from John Cena, as Amy's muscular squeeze; on the other hand, Apatow seems to have issued an open invitation to random celebrities—LeBron James, Chris Evert, Amar'e Stoudemire, Matthew Broderick, and Marv Albert—to join the film and make it into a party. Nice try.—*A.L.* (7/20/15) (In wide release.)

ABOVE & BEYOND

"Hudson River Park's Blues BBQ"

It may not be the Mississippi River, but the Hudson will do for a summer afternoon of fingerpicking and finger licking at this gathering, which combines music with smothered fare from some of the city's best barbecue joints, including Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, Brother Jimmy's BBQ, and Butcher Bar. The well-seasoned musical lineup features the Daptones soul artist Naomi Shelton, performing with the Gospel Queens; the Chicago-born blues artist Otis Taylor, who has more than a dozen albums under his belt; Jarekus Singleton, a youngish guitarist out of Mississippi; and Vanese Thomas, an R. & B., jazz, and soul singer from Memphis. It's the perfect afternoon

for New Yorkers, many of whom consider the South to be any place below Fourteenth Street. (Pier 26, Tribeca. hudsonriverpark.org. Aug. 22, starting at 2.)

"McDonald's B-Boy Royale II"

Back for its second year, this competition features the best of the East Coast b-boy crews busting moves for a chance at the grand prize of five thousand dollars. Co-hosted by the rapper MC Jin and the former MTV v.j. Grace Subervi, the event will also honor the break-dancing pioneer Richard (Crazy Legs) Colón. Eight troupes will be competing: 5 Crew Dynasty, Beast Coast, Dynamic Rockers, Lionz of Zion, Silverback Young Bloods, Supreme Beingz, Team Entree, and Titanz. With the

exception of Lionz of Zion, which formed in Washington, D.C., and Silverback Young Bloods, who are based in both N.Y.C. and Florida,

all the participating groups are local. (NYU Skirball Center, New York University, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-998-4941. Aug. 22 at 7.)

READINGS AND TALKS

"Word for Word"

The al-fresco reading series in Bryant Park comes to a close with Dr. Ruth Westheimer, who will talk about her book "The Doctor Is In: Dr. Ruth on Love, Life, and Joie de Vivre." (42nd St. side of the park, between Fifth and Sixth Aves. 212-768-4242. Aug. 19 at 12:30.)

BookCourt

The writer Barry Yourgrau talks about his new book, "Mess: One Man's Struggle to Clean Up His House and His Act," with Daniel B. Smith, the author of "Monkey Mind: A Memoir of Anxiety." (163 Court St., Brooklyn. 718-875-3677. Aug. 19 at 7.)

Greenlight Bookstore

Jess Row discusses his novel, "Your Face in Mine," with the writer Victor LaValle. (686 Fulton St., at S. Portland St., Brooklyn. 718-246-0200. Aug. 24 at 7:30.)



TABLES FOR TWO

THE BLACK ANT

60 Second Ave. (212-598-0300)

THIS SUMMER, TWITTER WAS SET ablaze by a controversial recipe for guacamole that called for green peas. At the Black Ant, in the East Village, the house guacamole varies; it has been studded with garbanzo beans, fried corn, orange slices, jicama, radishes, and even cheese. But it is always finished with ants. The garnish, to be precise, is *sal de hormiga*, or salt with ground-up *chicatanas*—large, winged leaf-cutter ants, harvested once a year, in the Mexican region of Oaxaca. The ants taste somewhere between nutty and buttery, with a chemical tang, and lend the salt a bit of umami. There are no peas in sight at the Black Ant, where unusual ingredients are esteemed and insects are the crown jewels.

Unless you know the Spanish word *chapulín*, you may not realize that the shrimp tacos are battered and fried in a crust of grasshoppers, creating a deliciously recursive arthropod. On the *tlayuda*, a crispy corn tortilla topped, like a small pizza, with black beans and soft cheese, the sautéed grasshoppers come whole and taste exquisitely of chili and lime. Pluck one from its lily pad of avocado cream, pop it in your mouth, and don't forget to chew, lest any legs stick in your throat.

You might have to Google some Nahuatl words to navigate the menu, but the more unusual the dish, the better. If it sounds familiar—like beet salad or miso black cod—you can probably skip it. One evening, a salad arrived with a pile of lettuce leaves, soupy with too-sweet dressing, very few beets, and two dollops of mysteriously tangless whipped goat cheese. An exception to this rule is the short rib, which swims in *mole chichilo*, a unique execution of the complex, earthy sauce that, unlike a more common *mole negro*, does not include chocolate but instead relies on blackened dried chilis for a rich, complex char.

Mole, insects, and corn are all Oaxacan staples, and the abstract-expressionist streaks and dots of sauce on the plates here are mere diversions from what is really a loving homage to that Mecca of Mexican cuisine. On its Web site, the restaurant seems to delight in the cross-cultural gross-out potential, and leans a little too heavily on Surrealist signposts like Dali and Buñuel, with a nice nod to the former's repulsive ants. The result is a bit of a mixed message: with the exception of a giant multicolored ant painted on the back wall of the dining room, the bugs at the Black Ant are nothing to be afraid of.

—Silvia Killingsworth

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PHOTOGRAPH BY DINA LITOVSKY



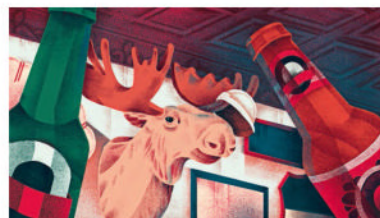
FOOD & DRINK

BAR TAB RACCOON LODGE

59 Warren St. (212-227-9894)

The beloved thirty-three-year-old lower-Manhattan mainstay—decorated with duck decoys, a moose head with hard hats on its antlers, and the double-rifles video game Big Buck Hunter—has long been a watering hole that attracts the whole village. Bankers, writers, ponytailed tough guys, women in tight pants, men with braids like Axl Rose: everybody sits side by side, drinking their fireballs and Honker's Ale, as the jukebox flows amiably from the Pure Prairie League to Jane's Addiction to 2 Chainz. One night this spring, after the Tribeca Film Festival, a young filmgoer said that his father used to drink there, and the bartender, Blaze Nowara, said that his dad, the owner, might have met him. Nowara also said that the bar was threatened with extinction: a developer wanted to raze the Raccoon Lodge and its neighbors to build luxury condos. A few weeks later, another bartender stapled a Stop Demolishing Tribeca flyer to the wall as her customers drank bracingly stiff Manhattans. Now the bar has until December to get out. Grieving, in the form of revelling, is ongoing. Last week, Nowara, looking game but glum, served a Buddy Guy enthusiast Jack-and-Cokes and nodded his head toward some tattooed men at the end of the bar. "They're from Hogs & Heifers," he said. "Their rent got raised from fourteen grand a month to sixty. They're closing August 23rd."

—Sarah Larson



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

RACE AND THE STORM

In April, 1927, after spring thaws and weeks of heavy rain, dozens of swollen tributaries poured into the Mississippi River, pushing it beyond its boundaries and initiating the twenty-seven-thousand-square-mile catastrophe that came to be known as the Great Flood. The river breached levees, funnelling as much as thirty feet of water into the surrounding areas, and wrought devastation unfathomable even in a region long accustomed to cyclical flooding. Bessie Smith etched the memory of the disaster into popular culture with “Backwater Blues,” a song written during the turbulent season that led up to the flood: “When it thunders and lightnin’ / and the wind begins to blow / There’s thousands of people / ain’t got no place to go.”

The waters wound through a South that was still defined by agricultural labor and debt peonage. Like the Mississippi itself, tumbling along a route constructed for it by a primitive levee system, the disaster followed a path that had been engineered beforehand, disproportionately affecting the poor, mostly black laborers who were anchored to the land by sharecropping contracts. In some instances, Red Cross supplies were disbursed to landlords, who sold them to tenant farmers. Tent encampments (then known as concentration camps) allowed entry to blacks fleeing the storm but required that they obtain special passes in order to leave. The black labor force was already diminished by the Great Migration, and the main concern was to insure that blacks would not use the flood as an opportunity to flee North. Herbert Hoover, the Secretary of Commerce, was appointed to head the recovery effort. In response to allegations of racism and mistreatment, he appointed a commission led by Robert Moton, a protégé of Booker T. Washington’s, and his successor at the Tuskegee Institute, to examine the charges. That report was not issued until 1929, safely after the 1928 election, in which Hoover had feared losing the traditionally Republican black

vote, but the damage was inescapable. In 1932, African-Americans deserted the G.O.P. to support Franklin Roosevelt, beginning a major realignment in American politics, and Hoover’s handling of the catastrophe was part of the reason for the shift.

As Richard Mizelle, Jr., writes, in his history of the flood (also titled “Backwater Blues”), what happened in 1927 is “part of a much longer narrative of how race, class, gender, and questions of social worth are framed through an environmental disaster.” That pattern has grown only more apparent. History, social science, and common sense have made it increasingly difficult not to consider the term “natural disaster” as a linguistic diversion, one that carries a hint of absolution. Hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods are natural phenomena; disasters, however, are often the work of humankind. The earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010 was two orders of magnitude weaker than the one that struck off the coast of Japan in 2011, yet it resulted in fifteen times more fatalities. The disparity was largely due to the relative geopolitical and economic standings of the two nations, and the corresponding standards of housing.

A decade after Hurricane Katrina, the images that it produced remain fresh in memory: bodies floating by major thoroughfares, the horrorscape of the Superdome, people stranded on rooftops like urban castaways. Official estimates hold that eighteen hundred and thirty-three people died as a result of the hurricane and the subsequent breaches of the levees. There is a temptation to say that the storm also swept away a particular kind of innocence about American poverty, but, in the days afterward, polls showed stark discrepancies in how blacks and whites viewed the federal government’s tardy response to the crisis and the role that race played in it. Sixty per cent of blacks said that the response was slow because of the race of the storm’s primary



victims; only twelve per cent of whites concurred. Sixty-three per cent of blacks felt that the response was slow because the victims were poor, a sentiment shared by just twenty-one per cent of whites.

Katrina didn't usher in a new narrative about race in America as much as it confirmed an old one. In 2006, Lil Wayne, a New Orleans native, released "Georgia . . . Bush," an indignant screed in which he claimed that the hurricane should have been named for the President who had presided over the mismanagement of the calamity. In the song, Wayne repeated a commonly held belief that the levees in the Lower Ninth Ward didn't fail but were detonated, so that the more valuable white neighborhoods would be spared—a rumor that also spread about the flood that engulfed the city after Hurricane Betsy, in 1965. The past haunts at the peripheries. For one set of people, Katrina was a tragedy compounded by ineptitude; for another, it was a recasting of a drama that stretched back at least eight decades and suggested that, if the past is prologue, the disaster was not just predictable but possibly inevitable.

Residents of St. Bernard Parish, who blocked the roads in order to keep black residents leaving the city from coming through their community, were playing a part similar to that of those who, nearly eighty years ago, refused to allow blacks

to leave the relief camps. In 2013, the parish paid \$2.5 million to settle lawsuits, one filed by the Department of Justice, alleging that it had contrived ordinances to prevent blacks from moving there after the storm. The population of New Orleans went from being sixty-seven per cent black, in 2005, to fifty-nine per cent, in 2013, which literally changed the color of the electoral politics in the city.

The ghosts of the past remain discernible in at least one other way. Media reports often referred to New Orleanians displaced by Katrina as "refugees," a word that, in a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll, seventy-seven per cent of blacks, and just thirty-seven per cent of whites, took exception to. The term, with its connotations of foreigners crossing borders to seek asylum, cut closer to the bone in a population whose citizenship has so frequently been challenged. Katrina can be viewed as the first of a series of crises that seem to have become a referendum on black citizenship. The poll respondents were asked if they were "bothered" by the word "refugee." The presumption was that many took issue with a loaded term being applied inaccurately. A decade later, it's worth wondering whether they were "bothered" by a fear that "refugee," not "citizen," had been the most apt description all along.

—Jelani Cobb

PARTY HOPPING ENTER SANDMAN



Days before Donald Trump helped draw twenty-four million viewers to Fox for the first Republican Presidential primary debate, Senator Bernie Sanders, of Vermont, took to YouTube for a new-media gambit. Broadcasting from a drab Washington, D.C., apartment, the Brooklyn-bred Democratic candidate delivered a fifteen-minute speech, which was screened for a hundred thousand fans at gatherings around the country. Among the venues registered on the Sanders Web site: "a GMO-free restaurant in the same parking lot as Sapphires Strip Club" (Las Vegas, Nevada), "My Home in the Woods" (Burton, Ohio), and the "Schatsky Family Household" (New York, New York).

"Welcome! Hope everyone got pizza," eighteen-year-old Ronen Schatsky, a recent Trinity School graduate, said before the broadcast. It was dinnertime at his family's Upper West Side condo, and Schatsky had procured ten cheese pies for thirty guests—a mix of prep-school

comrades and white-haired sixties nostalgists. Those assembled in the living room "to channel our support for Bernie into concrete actions," per Schatsky's invite, did not include his parents, the relational psychologist Susan Bodnar and the research strategist David Schatsky. "Ronen just kind of told us he was doing this," his mother had said earlier, over the phone. The apartment, according to an article called "Teach Your Parents Well," in *Dwell*, had been eco-fitted at the behest of Ronen and his sister, when they were eight and five. "I just said they should do a sustainable apartment, and they hired an architect," said Ronen, who will attend the University of Chicago, after a gap year spent farming in Europe and hiking the Appalachian Trail.

One guest, Liz Friedman, a retired Jewish-community fund-raiser known on style blogs for her enormous colorful jewelry, grumbled about the no-shoes policy. "Very hostile," she said, still wearing her silver flats.

At seven-thirty, the feed went live. A civil-rights attorney, the only black person visible on either side of the screen, introduced Sanders with talk of police shootings. (Sanders has been dogged by #BlackLivesMatter protesters.) The candidate stuck largely to wealth inequality. "Enough is enough!" he said, calling

the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling "one of the worst decisions in the history of our country." In the Schatsky apartment, there was applause for single-payer health care and head-shaking for the campaign worker who urged audiences to volunteer by texting the word "work" to the number "82623." Schatsky assured his visitors, "We can sign you up without smartphones!"

Fifty blocks south, fifteen leftists sat on plastic stools in a cramped Chelsea home office, and debriefed. They had watched Sanders's speech on an old iMac. Vered Mallon, a former League of Women Voters official, who was wearing a floral baby-doll dress, remarked, "He was quiet, so he drew you in, not like all the slick ones." The host was Eric Stenshoel, an intellectual-property lawyer who is also a linguist studying Welsh adjectives. "I'm basically a socialist," he said, explaining his support for Sanders. "I lived in Sweden for half a year in college." He shares the two-bedroom apartment with his husband, a tenants-rights activist. Stenshoel said, "We vie for who's further left."

The group talked tactics. Grant Siefman, a Whole Foods marketing assistant, suggested petitioning local Democratic delegates: "We're impossible to ignore right now." They dispersed at 9 P.M., vowing to begin canvassing. "He's

not Donald Trump,” Mallon said. “He needs us.”

An hour later, at Die Koelner Bierhalle, a hangar of a bar in Park Slope, Charles Carr, the head organizer for the Brooklyn College Democrats, considered Sanders’s appeal. “He’s been chanting these points for decades,” he said. “It’s almost like a nice pair of leather shoes with a reasonable, durable sole. Something that fits very snug, but you know it’s going to stretch over the years and get comfortable and lived-in. Personally, I wear Eccos.” That day, the Dems had formally endorsed Sanders, who spent his freshman year at Brooklyn College, and they’d rallied more than two hundred supporters to the bar. “The last hour has mostly been networking,” Carr said.

Dave Handy, a twenty-seven-year-old progressive strategist, whose firm worked to get Zephyr Teachout on the 2014 New York gubernatorial ballot, said, “I’m Brooklyn for Bernie, and he’s People for Bernie.” He poked a guy beside him—Joe Beuerlein, an actor-bartender. Handy added, “People for Bernie started a Brooklyn for Bernie.”

Another activist interrupted: “People for Bernie and Brooklyn for Bernie are now really New York for Bernie.”

“We’re merging the factions,” Carr said, but he was chastened by Beuerlein.

“‘Faction’ is a horrible word. Let’s use ‘group,’” he said, over strains of “Stormy Weather.”

—Daniel Wenger

THE PICTURES DANCE OF THE CONCHORD



Jemaine Clement was early for the dance in the church basement. The gap-toothed actor and mainstay of the tongue-in-cheek band Flight of the Conchords had put on a loose shirt and shorts and grown a broody, two-day beard in preparation for the unlit “No Lights, No Lycra” jam at a Lutheran church in Greenpoint. But the door—posted with rules that included “No watching,” “No breakdancing,” “No cell phones,” and “Sh-h-h!”—wouldn’t open till 8:15 P.M.

The “No Lights, No Lycra” craze originated in Australia, in 2009, and soon migrated to Clement’s native New Zealand, where he heard about it from two friends. “One loved it,” he reported. “One said it made her feel dizzy.” In L.A., he’d sought out the Cimmerian revels but failed to pinpoint the appeal, so now he was trying again. “Why is it different from dancing in your house, where no one can see you?” he wondered. “Maybe it’s the smell.” On cue, a passing young woman explained, “In the dark, you can dance however you feel in your heart.”

Deciding, after some bashful waffling, to work up to baring his heart, Clement repaired to a local dive bar. Noting its mock-Tudor timbering and the bartender’s head kerchief, he murmured, “This looks like a pirate bar.” His request for a lemonade elicited a scowl. “Are you British?” the bartender asked. “Because British people ask for lemonade when they mean Sprite.” “I meant lemonade,” Clement said, not quite audibly.

He accepted a warm glass of water. Then he demonstrated his favorite dance move: the prancing horse, where you kick up one foot and canter forward. “You can add reins if you choose,” he noted. After a moment, he clarified: “It’s more for dancing in lit areas.”

Clement has none of the overconfidence of the Playboy Mansion screen persona he sometimes affects, and all of the quizzicality of his more usual persona. A lot of lacerating thoughts seem to go unsaid. In the film “People Places Things,” which opened last week, he plays a graphic novelist named Will Henry, who lives in Brooklyn and feels generally put upon—particularly after he discovers his girlfriend, Charlie, the mother of his five-year-old twins, having sex with a tubby monologist named Gary. After Charlie leaves Will and begins taking improv classes, she explains to him that “Gary thinks I have a lot of unexplored talent.” “Does he?” Will replies—a rejoinder that Clement freights with sarcasm and longing. But Clement said that while his Jemaine character on the bygone HBO show “Flight of the Conchords” could be passive-aggressive—“He was a bit of a wimp”—Will is simply passive: “He’s entertaining himself, by insulting two people at once, and thinking

no one’s listening. Unlike almost every other character in films, who takes decisive action by a certain page in the script, Will feels like a slice of real life, because he doesn’t have the power to change.”

Seeing a block of posters for Gary’s latest monologue finally inspires Will to act: he pulls out a chisel-tipped pen. “I actually drew the vandalism you see myself,” Clement said, proudly. “The ones of Gary as bin Laden and Hitler were in the script, but I added the vomit, and an eyeball coming out—the gross-out stuff. And if Gary’s image hadn’t



Jemaine Clement

been cut off here”—he indicated his chest—“it would have been nice to put a tiny penis on him.”

Nursing his water, he explained that he’d never sought to be the center of attention: “When I was twenty, I was a writer for a New Zealand sketch show called ‘Skitz’ that wasn’t very good. We’d get told off a lot by our producer and then we’d sit together at dinner, silent. I realized that if I wrote a part I could play—a nerd, or someone I could do an impression of, like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Mick Jagger or Prince—it would give me a day out of the writing room. So I guess I’m still amused now that I’m doing acting. It’s just a funny thing to do as an adult—it’s silly!”

He walked back to the church. Inside, some forty people, most of them women in shorts and T-shirts, were dancing beneath a laser display that spotlighted the ceiling with green stars. It was sweaty and intimate, communal yet solitary. Invoking the rule against merely watching,

Clement adjured his companion to “at least wave your arms!” Then he danced off. As far as could be determined in the gloaming, he did not unleash the prancing horse. After ten minutes, he confided, over the music, “I just realized you’re going to use dancing in the dark as a metaphor for a shy performer! It’s what I would do!” Drawing away, he called out a qualifying “Probably!”

—*Tad Friend*

THE SPORTING SCENE

FOUL TIPS



Joel Carben attended his first professional baseball game in 1980, at Yankee Stadium, as a five-year-old. He and his father sat in the upper deck, in right field, “way, way up in barely-see-it-ville,” he recalls. He remembers a man sitting behind them with a jug of moonshine, yelling vulgarities at Reggie Jackson, and he remembers his father admonishing him to keep his eyes on the ball, a lesson that he has internalized with near-fanaticism. Today, when he attends a game, as he often does, he tracks foul balls: where they land, their angle of approach. He is not interested in what this might reveal about the players produc-

ing the foul balls, or in how teams might improve their performance, using his data. “I kind of feel like a bit of a stadium scientist,” he said recently, and likened himself to the Bill James of the fan experience. He simply wants to know where you should sit if you’d like to take home a souvenir.

Carben was at Yankee Stadium for a game against the Seattle Mariners, with his wife, Rachel, and their two daughters, Zadie and Roxanne, who are four and two. It was his twentieth ballpark out of an eventual thirty, on a cross-country tour to help spread the word about his company, IdealSeat, which offers an app to help you choose (and purchase) tickets to games. He thinks of it as “Stub-Hub with data.” Demonstrating on his iPhone, he selected an upcoming Yankees-Blue Jays matinee, and optimized for foul balls. The app proposed four seats in Section 112—lower tier, short right field—and Row 25. Cost: a thousand dollars. Yikes!

The Carbens’ seats for this particular game were twenty dollars apiece, owing to the budgetary constraints of a startup and a commitment to bonding with the common fan. This put them in Section 236, on the second tier of the left-field bleachers, where foul balls are out of the question but mammoth home runs are a remote possibility. “Keep your eyes up!” Carben said to his fidgeting girls, as the Mariners’

cleanup batter, Nelson Cruz, came to the plate in the top of the second. Carben pulled a Rawlings mitt out of his backpack and put it on. “My prediction is Nelson Cruz is going to put a bomb in here,” he said.

“Is that probabilistic?” Rachel asked.

“It’s a science—and an art,” Joel replied.

The highest likelihood for catching a home run, Carben admitted, lay in Section 136, down beneath them, and across the field in Section 103, below a Modell’s billboard. Cruz, in any event, grounded out to second. Carben removed his glove and resumed tracking fouls on a piece of paper with a diagram of the stadium. Soon, an old friend of Carben’s from high school, named Shawn, arrived, looking a little ragged from the previous night’s U2 concert, at Madison Square Garden. “Fifth row, front and center,” Shawn bragged. “No, they didn’t throw any drumsticks in the crowd, unfortunately.” The stadium scientist appeared to make a mental note.

Foul tracking requires live attendance, because the TV cameras routinely cut away after the ball leaves the playing surface. Carben relies on a network of about a hundred volunteers, including a dedicated Twins fan who files nightly reports from Minnesota. On this occasion, the demands of parenting led Carben to deputize a seatmate, who feels certain that he missed a few, because of a habit of making small talk whenever the action on the field ceases.

Nonetheless, the deputized tracker found himself recording the number 112 in several instances, and realized that a secret to that optimal section is that it sits near the ball boy’s perch. What you may be getting, if you shell out for those seats, is a chance that a Yankees employee will toss you an errant ball. Rawlings not required.

The game was shaping up to be a pitchers’ duel, and the faint promise of home runs gave way to a more pressing concern: getting out of the sun. It was ninety-some degrees, and the ideal seat was anywhere that was less sweaty. Carben’s app allows you to prioritize things like shade and proximity to beer, too, and as the Carben family headed for cover they passed a long line outside the Mohegan Sun Sports Bar.

—*Ben McGrath*



“Now you just throw it back, apparently.”

THE FINANCIAL PAGE

THE SHORT-TERMISM MYTH

In recent years, it's become a commonplace that American companies are too obsessed with the short term. In the heyday of Bell Labs and Xerox PARC, the argument goes, corporations had long time horizons and invested heavily in the future. But now investors care only about quarterly earnings and short-term stock prices, so companies skimp on R.&D. and waste hundreds of billions propping up their stock with share buybacks. This "tyranny of accountants" has damaged both the long-term prospects of companies and the U.S. economy as a whole.

The latest public figure to embrace this diagnosis is Hillary Clinton. In a speech a couple of weeks ago, she unveiled a solution: changing the capital-gains tax in order to encourage investors to hold stocks longer. Right now, there are only two capital-gains categories: anything held for less than a year is short-term; anything longer is long-term. Clinton's plan, which would apply only to investors in the highest tax bracket, would expand the definition of short-term to include any investment held for less than two years, and it would create a sliding scale of rates. For every extra year (up to six) that you keep a stock, you pay a lower rate.

The political appeal of the plan is clear. It targets wealthy investors, is friendly to executives, and is aimed at getting companies to spend more money. Unfortunately, it almost certainly won't work. The simplest reason for this is that the plan would affect only a small slice of the market. Len Burman, a tax expert at the Urban Institute, told me, "The plan's unlikely to have a major impact on stock prices, since most of the money in the market is controlled by institutions that don't pay capital-gains taxes, like endowments and pension funds." Burman also made the point that pushing people to hold stocks they would rather sell is hardly conducive to productive investment. "Even if short-termism is the problem, locking people into unprofitable transactions for long periods of time doesn't really seem like a great solution," he said.

Aside from these practical problems, the plan rests on two common but ultimately questionable assumptions. The first is that corporate decision-makers care only about the short term. The second is that it's the stock market that makes them think this way. These assumptions are widely shared and long-standing, in both business and academe. A famous report from the Council on Competitiveness in the early nineties concluded that, compared with Germany and Japan, the U.S. was greatly underinvesting in the future. In 2005, the

C.E.O. of Xerox, Anne Mulcahy, described the pressure from Wall Street for short-term profits as "a huge problem," and, in a survey of executives that same year, more than half said they would delay valuable new projects in order to boost short-term earnings.

That sounds pretty bad. Yet when you actually look at the numbers the story gets more complicated. There is reason to think that some companies are investing too little in the future. As a whole, though, corporate spending on R.&D. has risen steadily over the years, and has stayed relatively constant as a share of G.D.P. and as a share of sales. This year, R.&D. spending is accelerating at its fastest pace in fifty years and is at an all-time high as a percentage of G.D.P. Furthermore, U.S. companies don't spend notably less on R.&D. than their international competitors. Similarly with investors: their alleged obsession with short-term earnings is hard to see in the data. Several studies in the nineties found that companies announcing major R.&D. investments were rewarded by the

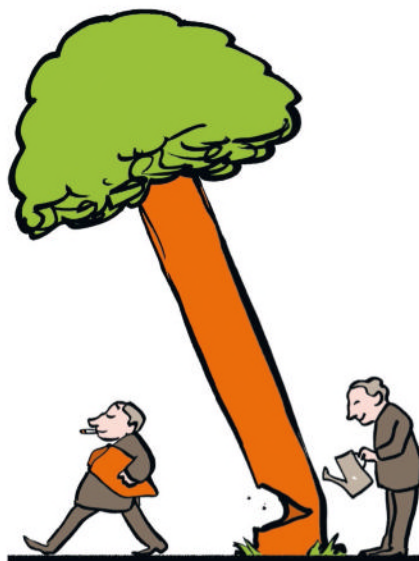
markets, not punished, and that companies with more institutional investors (who typically have shorter time horizons) spent more on R.&D., not less. A 2011 Deutsche Bank study of more than a thousand companies found that those which spent significantly more on R.&D. than their competitors were more highly valued by investors. And a 2014 study of companies that cut R.&D. spending in order to meet short-term earnings goals found that their stocks underperformed after earnings had been announced—hardly what you'd expect if the market cared only about the short term.

Of course, there's no shortage of investors who are myopic. But the market, for the most part, isn't. That's why companies like Amazon and Tesla and Netflix,

whose profits in the present have typically been a tiny fraction of their market caps, have been able to command colossal valuations. It's why there's a steady flow of I.P.O.s for companies with small revenues and nonexistent earnings. And it's why the biotech industry is now valued at more than a trillion dollars, even though many of the firms have yet to bring a single drug to market. None of these things are what you'd expect from a market dominated by short-term considerations.

To the extent that companies are underinvesting in the future, the blame lies not with investors but with executives. The pay of many C.E.O.s is tied to factors like short-term earnings, rather than to longer-term metrics, which naturally fosters myopia. That 2014 study of companies that cut R.&D. spending found that the executives responsible saw their pay rise sharply, even though the stock didn't. If Clinton really wants to deal with short-termism, she'd be better off targeting the way executive compensation works, instead of the way capital gains are taxed. Ultimately, the solution to short-termism isn't on Wall Street. It's in the executive suite.

—James Surowiecki



A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

Can Christiana Figueres persuade humanity to save itself?

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT



The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or U.N.F.C.C.C., has by now been ratified by a hundred and ninety-five countries, which, depending on how you count, represents either all the countries in the world or all the countries and then some. Every year, the treaty stipulates, the signatories have to hold a meeting—a gathering that’s known as a COP, short for Conference of the Parties. The third COP produced the Kyoto Protocol, which, in turn, gave rise to another mandatory gathering, a MOP, or Meeting of the Parties. The seventeenth COP, which coincided with the seventh MOP, took place in South Africa. There it was decided that the work

of previous COPs and MOPs had been inadequate, and a new group was formed—the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action, usually referred to as the A.D.P. The A.D.P. subsequently split into A.D.P.-1 and A.D.P.-2, each of which held meetings of its own. The purpose of the U.N.F.C.C.C. and of the many negotiating sessions and working groups and protocols it has spun off over the years is to prevent “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” In climate circles, this is usually shortened to D.A.I. In plain English, it means global collapse.

The Framework Convention on

Climate Change is overseen by an organization known as the Secretariat, which is led by a Costa Rican named Christiana Figueres. Figueres is five feet tall, with short brown hair and strikingly different-colored eyes—one blue and one hazel. In contrast to most diplomats, who cultivate an air of professional reserve, Figueres is emotive to the point of disarming—“a mini-volcano” is how one of her aides described her to me. She laughs frequently—a hearty, ha-ha-ha chortle—and weeps almost as often. “I walk around with Kleenex,” another aide told me.

Figueres, who is fifty-nine, is an avid runner—the first time I met her, she was hobbling around with blisters acquired from a half marathon—and an uninhibited dancer. Last fall, when her office was preparing for the twentieth COP, which was held in Lima, she and some of her assistants secretly practiced a routine set to Beyoncé’s “Move Your Body.” At a meeting of the Secretariat staff, which numbers more than five hundred, they ripped off their jackets and started to jump, jump, jump.

Figueres works out of a spacious office in Bonn, in a building that used to belong to the German parliament. On the wall by her desk there’s a framed motto that reads, “Impossible is not a fact, it is an attitude.” On another wall there’s a poster showing the Statue of Liberty waist-high in water, and on a third a black-and-white photograph of Figueres’s father, José, who led the Costa Rican revolution of 1948. He served as President of the country three times, pushed through sweeping political and social reforms, and abolished Costa Rica’s army as a stay against dictatorship. Figueres grew up partly in the President’s House and partly on her father’s farm, which he called La Lucha sin Fin—“the struggle without end.”

“I’m very comfortable with the word ‘revolution,’” Figueres told me. “In my experience, revolutions have been very positive.”

Of all the jobs in the world, Figueres’s may possess the very highest ratio of responsibility (preventing global collapse) to authority (practically none). The role entails convincing a hundred and ninety-five countries—many of which rely on selling fossil fuels for their national income and almost all of which depend on burning them for the bulk of

“I’m very comfortable with the word ‘revolution,’” Figueres said.

their energy—that giving up such fuels is a good idea. When Figueres took over the Secretariat, in 2010, there were lots of people who thought the job so thankless that it ought to be abolished. This was in the aftermath of the fifteenth COP, held in Copenhagen, which had been expected to yield a historic agreement but ended in anger and recrimination.

Figueres and her team have spent the years since Copenhagen trying to learn from its mistakes. How well they have done so will become apparent three months from now, when world leaders meet for this year's COP—the twenty-first—in Paris. Like Copenhagen, Paris is being billed as a historic event—“our last hope,” in the words of Fatih Birol, the incoming director of the International Energy Agency—and, again, expectations are running high. “We are duty-bound to succeed,” France's President, François Hollande, has declared.

The danger of high expectations, of course, is that they can be all the more devastatingly dashed. Figueres, who is well aware of this, is doing her best to raise them further, on the theory that the best way to make something happen is to convince people that it is going to happen. “I have not met a single human being who's motivated by bad news,” she told me. “Not a single human being.”

To understand how the fate of the planet came to be entrusted to a corps of mostly anonymous, mid-level diplomats, you have to go back to the nineteen-eighties, when the world confronted its first atmospheric crisis. That crisis, the so-called ozone hole, was the product of chemicals known as chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs. When they were invented, in the nineteen-twenties, CFCs were hailed as miracle compounds—safe alternatives to the toxic gases used as early refrigerants. Lots of additional uses were found for CFCs before it was discovered that the chemicals had the nasty effect of breaking down stratospheric ozone, which protects the earth from ultraviolet radiation. (F. Sherwood Rowland, a chemist who shared a Nobel Prize for this discovery, once reportedly came home from his lab and told his wife, “The work is going well, but it looks like it might be the end of the world.”) A global treaty—the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer—was signed in

1985 and sent to the U.S. Senate by President Ronald Reagan, who called for its “expeditious ratification.” This broadly worded “framework” was soon followed by the Montreal Protocol, which called for drastic cuts in CFC usage.

The Montreal Protocol, which has been revised a half-dozen times, mainly in response to new scientific data, averted a dystopian future filled with skin cancer and cataracts. (If you're sitting in the sun right now, in a roundabout way you can thank the Montreal Protocol.) Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the U.N., has labelled it “perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date.”

When scientists first sounded the alarm about carbon emissions, it seemed logical to try to follow the Montreal template. In 1988, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring climate change to be a “common concern of mankind.” The following year, talks began on what was to become the Framework Convention.

The ozone treaty had divided the world into two blocs: high CFC users, like the United States, and low users, like Bangladesh. High users, who were largely responsible for the problem, were expected to act first, low users later. The same high-low distinction held for climate change; some countries had contributed a great deal to the problem, others very little. But almost immediately the blocs fractured into sub-blocs. Oil-producing states, like Saudi Arabia, split with low-lying, easily inundated nations, like Maldives. Rapidly industrializing countries, like India, saw their interests as very different from those of what are officially known as Least Developed Countries, like Ethiopia. The European Union wanted a treaty with strict targets and timetables for reducing carbon emissions. The United States—at that point the world's largest emitter—refused even to consider such targets. On the eve of what was supposed to be the final negotiating session on the Framework Convention, the working draft of the document, according to one participant, resembled a “compilation of contradictory positions more than a recognizable legal instrument.”

The convention was rescued, at a price. The final version of the treaty, presented in Rio in 1992, called for the “stabiliza-

tion of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” But it left virtually all decisions about how this was to be accomplished to future negotiations. Also left unresolved was how those decisions were to be reached: the convention provided no rules for voting, though it noted that such rules ought to be adopted.

This constitutive vagueness has troubled climate negotiations ever since. The parties to the convention have never managed to agree on rules for voting, meaning that every decision must—in theory, at least—be arrived at by consensus. And while a few countries have cut their CO₂ output since the convention was signed, globally emissions have soared, from about six billion metric tons of carbon a year in the early nineteen-nineties, to almost ten billion metric tons today.

Figueres lives about five miles from downtown Bonn, on the opposite side of the Rhine, in the town of Königswinter. She owns a Prius but usually takes the tram to work. One evening this spring, I rode the tram home with her. She had spent the previous night in Munich and was dragging a rolling suitcase behind her. On the walk from the tram stop to her apartment, she dropped by a market to buy food for dinner. She had no shopping bag, so she decided to carry the groceries home in her suitcase.

“I'm not Alice in Wonderland,” she told me, once we got upstairs. “You and I are sitting here, in this gorgeous apartment, enjoying this fantastic privilege, because of fossil fuels.” Figueres, who is separated from her husband, has two grown daughters, one of whom works in New York, the other in Panama. Her apartment is decorated with vividly colored paintings by Central American artists, and it looks directly onto the Rhine, which, on this particular evening, was untrafficked except for an occasional coal barge.

At the time of my visit, Figueres was preparing for a trip to Saudi Arabia. Over drinks on her balcony, she described what it had been like working with the Saudis at climate negotiations when she herself was a delegate, representing Costa Rica. “They would throw a wrench in here and get out of that room in which the issue was A, then appear over in this

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#lunch



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other room, in which it was a completely unrelated issue, throw a wrench in there, and disappear," she recalled. "I would stand there with my mouth open. I would go, These guys are brilliant.

"The Saudis are sitting on a vast reserve of very cheap oil," she continued. "Can you blame them for trying to protect that resource and that income for as long as they can? I don't blame them. It's very understandable. Let's do a thought experiment. I come from a country that has only hydro and wind as power resources. If I had been born in a country with fossil-fuel reserves, would I have a different opinion about what's good for the world? Maybe. Very likely, in fact.

"I don't want to put people into a black box and say, 'You're the culprits,' and point a blaming finger. It just helps absolutely nothing. Call it my anthropological training. Call it whatever. But I always want to understand: what is behind all of this?"

Growing up in Costa Rica, Figueres was sent to the Humboldt School, in San José, where she learned to speak fluent German. For college, she came to the United States—to Swarthmore—where she studied anthropology. Then she spent a year working with the Bribri, an indigenous people who live in Costa Rica's Talamanca Mountains. The village had no electricity or running water.

"I have no problem sitting on the floor, sipping hot water from a dirty cup," she told me. "I also have no problem sitting next to Prince Charles." Figueres had brought along a camera to document the Bribri's lives. She discovered that they loved to see photographs of themselves, and so every few months she would trek out of the village, by foot and by donkey, to get the pictures developed. Once, she also brought back a postcard showing New York City at night: "I thought, Let's see how they interpret this. So I just showed them the photograph, and I said, 'What is this?'"

"Ah," they said. "All the little stars of heaven in rows!" What a beautiful interpretation. They had no concept of what a lit city was. The only light they had seen at night was the stars. And then, all of a sudden, all these little stars were in rows! Now, funnily enough, I think about that response almost daily. Because my feeling is that all the little stars are aligning themselves in a different sense."

It is Figueres's contention that all the nations of the world are now working in good faith to try to reach a climate agreement, and that includes Saudi Arabia. She cited her invitation from the country as a sign of its new, more "constructive" approach. On her trip, she wanted to be careful to adhere to the nation's strict dress code, so she had had her secretary call to ask what was expected of her. "I know that in Riyadh I need to wear a burka," she told me. "Elsewhere, if they want me to wear an abaya I'll wear an abaya."

She also wanted to be mindful of the Saudis' linguistic requirements. "They don't like the term 'low carbon,'" she explained. "They don't like the term 'decarbonization,' because for them that points the finger directly at them. They would rather use the term 'low emissions.'" This spreads the blame for global warming to other greenhouse gases, like nitrous oxide and hydrofluorocarbons. (In an unfortunate irony, hydrofluorocarbons, which, molecule for molecule, trap far more heat than CO₂, were specifically engineered to replace ozone-depleting CFCs.)

"Well, frankly, I sometimes do talk about 'decarbonization,'" Figueres went on. "But certainly I won't talk about 'decarbonization' when I'm in Saudi Arabia, because I understand that is very threatening to them. Why would I want to threaten them? I need them on my side. The best thing that could happen to me would be that Saudi Arabia says, 'You know what? With all the money that we have, we're going to invest in the best technology in concentrated solar power.'"

In the lead-up to Paris, each country has been asked to submit a plan outlining how and by how much it will reduce its carbon output—or, to use the Saudis' preferred term, its emissions. The plans are known as "intended nationally determined contributions"—in U.N.-speak, I.N.D.C.s. The whole approach has been labelled "bottom up," which, by implication, makes previous efforts to cut carbon—in particular, the Kyoto Protocol—"top down."

Drafted in 1997, Kyoto represented the first and, as yet, the only time that the parties managed to fill in some of the Framework Convention's many blanks. People who attended that COP still

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"Masterful."

—J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN

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remember it as a kind of endurance test for the soul. Figueres, who was there with the Costa Rican delegation, described it as "an absolutely harrowing experience."

Kyoto imposed specific targets on roughly forty countries of the global North (not all of which, of course, are actually in the North). The targets varied from country to country; the nations of the European Union, for instance, were, collectively, supposed to cut their emissions by eight per cent, while the United States was supposed to cut them by seven per cent. (This was against a baseline of 1990.) Canada was expected to reduce its emissions by six per cent. Australia's target allowed its emissions to grow, but not beyond eight per cent.

Countries in the global South were not given targets, on the theory that it would be unfair to ask them to reduce their already relatively small output. (Saudi Arabia, part of this second group, tried to scuttle the agreement in advance, by demanding that the text be circulated six months before the final negotiating session.) It was the United States that helped rescue the protocol—Vice-President Al Gore flew to Kyoto when the talks appeared to be foundering—and it was also the U.S. that very nearly killed it. The Senate refused to ratify the treaty, and shortly after George W. Bush entered the White House, in 2001, he announced that his Administration would not abide by its terms.

"Kyoto is dead" is how Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national-security adviser, put it. In fact, the treaty survived, but in a zombielike state. The U.S. ignored it. The Canadians blew past their target and, midway through the period covered by Kyoto, withdrew from the agreement. Only the Europeans really took their goal seriously, not only meeting it but exceeding it.

Meanwhile, as Kyoto shambled on, the horizon receded. In the mid-nineties, China was emitting nearly a billion metric tons of carbon a year. By the mid-aughts, its output was twice that amount. In 2005, China surpassed the United States as the world's largest emitter on an annual basis. (The U.S. still holds first place in terms of cumulative emissions.) Nowadays, China's per-capita emissions are as high as Western Europe's (though not nearly as high as those in the U.S.). The more than a

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"Sharp-eyed."

—EMMA STRAUB

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thousand new coal-fired power plants that went up from Guangdong to Xinjiang made Dutch wind turbines and German solar farms seem increasingly irrelevant; all of Europe's cuts were effectively cancelled out by a few months' worth of emissions growth in China. Scientists warned that the world was on track for an average global-temperature rise of four degrees Celsius (more than seven degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of this century. Such a temperature increase, they predicted, would transform the globe into a patchwork of drowned cities, desertifying croplands, and collapsing ecosystems. As a report from the World Bank noted, it's not clear "that adaptation to a 4°C world is possible."

It was to get off this path that negotiators met in Copenhagen in 2009. The new plan was supposed to establish stricter targets and extend them to more countries, including China. Instead, what emerged from the session was yet another prolegomenon to future negotiations, brokered at the very last minute—and over the objections of many other world leaders—by President Barack Obama. Known as the Copenhagen Accord, the document—a sort of climate wish list—identified a temperature rise of two degrees Celsius as the danger point for the planet. It also promised funding to help poor countries affected by warming. This funding is supposed to amount to a hundred billion dollars a year.

Figueres spends much of her time travelling around the globe, meeting with anyone she thinks might advance the cause. A few weeks after she visited Saudi Arabia, she went to London, where she spoke to, among others, Bill Gates, Rich-

ard Branson, and Al Gore. "In my opinion, Christiana has done a terrific job under excruciatingly difficult circumstances," Gore told me. From London, she flew to New York for three more days of back-to-back meetings.

One morning began with a breakfast at Citigroup's headquarters, on Park Avenue. Seated around the table were the New York State comptroller, the chief investment officer of Connecticut's pension funds, and representatives of several major investment firms. Figueres began by assuring the group that the negotiations leading to Paris were "still on track." Then she turned her attention to money.

"Where capital goes over the next fifteen years is going to decide whether we're actually able to address climate change and what kind of a century we are going to have," she said. She urged all those present to take this into account when making their own investment decisions, and to do so publicly: "What we truly need is to create a 'surround sound' where, no matter what sector you turn to, there is a signal saying, 'Folks, we are moving toward a low-carbon economy. It is irreversible; it is unstoppable. So get on the bandwagon.'"

The debate over what to do—or not to do—about global warming has always been, at its core, an economic one. Since the start of the industrial revolution, growth has been accompanied—indeed, made possible—by rising emissions. Hence the reluctance of most nations to commit to cutting carbon. But what if growth and emissions could be uncoupled?

In some parts of Europe, what has been called "conscious uncoupling" is already well along. Sweden, one of the few countries that tax carbon, has reduced its

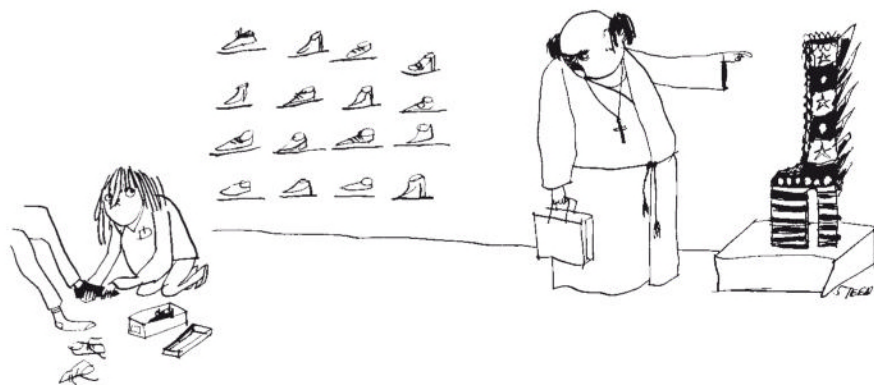
emissions by about twenty-three per cent in the past twenty-five years. During that same period, its economy has grown by more than fifty-five per cent. Last year, perhaps for the first time since the invention of the steam engine, global emissions remained flat even as the global economy grew, by about three per cent.

Figueres maintains that global uncoupling is not only possible but obligatory. "We frankly don't have an option," she told me. "Because there are two things that are absolutely key to being able to feed, house, and educate the two billion more family members who will be joining us. You have to continue to grow. And, particularly, developing countries need to continue to grow. But the other sine-qua-non condition is that you can't continue to grow greenhouse gases, because that kills the possibility of growth. So, since you have those two constant constraints—you have to grow G.D.P., but you cannot grow G.H.G.s—what option do you have?"

The day Figueres met with investors at Citigroup, China submitted its emissions plan, or I.N.D.C. The plan elaborated on the country's pledge to "peak" its emissions by 2030. That pledge, first made public in November, was part of a deal announced jointly with the United States. At the time, it was hailed as a breakthrough, as China had previously resisted making any commitment to capping its emissions, ever. The *Washington Post* labelled the announcement a "landmark"; *Time* called it "historic."

It was "huge, absolutely huge," Figueres told me. In its I.N.D.C., China said that it would make its "best efforts" to cap its emissions earlier than 2030. It also pledged to increase its share of energy produced from "non-fossil fuels" to twenty per cent. (As one commentator pointed out, to fulfill the latter promise China will have to add enough solar, wind, or nuclear generating capacity to power the U.S.'s entire electrical grid.)

Iceland, Serbia, and South Korea also submitted their plans that day. In its submission, South Korea, the world's eleventh-largest emitter, committed to only trivial reductions, saying it could not go further because its economy is so heavily based on manufacturing. Analysts criticized the South Korean plan as essentially meaningless. Nevertheless, Figueres included the country in



"Do you have this in a flat brown sandal?"

her Twitter feed. “Thx Republic of Korea,” she tweeted after leaving Citigroup. She was headed over to the U.N. to meet with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

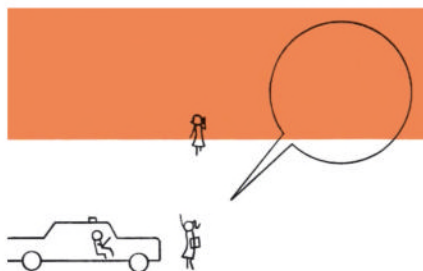
When climate scientists talk about carbon, they usually do so in terms of parts per million. During the last ice age, when much of North America was covered in glaciers a mile thick, carbon-dioxide levels in the atmosphere were around a hundred and eighty parts per million. For the ten thousand years leading up to the industrial revolution, they hovered around two hundred and eighty parts per million. By 1992, when the Framework Convention was drafted, they had reached three hundred and fifty parts per million. As MOP followed COP, carbon-dioxide levels kept rising. This spring, they topped four hundred parts per million.

Owing to the CO₂ that’s been pumped into the air so far, average global temperatures have risen by about 0.85 degrees Celsius (1.5 degrees Fahrenheit). This relatively small increase has produced some very large effects: almost half of the permanent Arctic ice cap has melted away, millions of acres’ worth of trees in the American West have died from warming-related pest infestations, and some of West Antarctica’s major glaciers, containing tens of thousands of cubic miles of ice, have started to disintegrate. But the system has yet to reach a new equilibrium, so even if CO₂ levels were to stop rising tomorrow the world would continue to warm, by about .5 degrees Celsius (.9 degrees Fahrenheit).

To hold warming to less than two degrees Celsius, the best estimates available suggest that total emissions will have to be kept under a trillion tons of carbon. The world has already consumed around two-thirds of this budget. If current trends continue, the last third will be used up within the next few decades. What’s fundamentally at issue in Paris—although the matter is never stated this baldly, because, if it were, the conference might as well be called off—is who should be allowed to emit the tons that remain.

One approach would be to assign these tons on the basis of aggregate emissions. Under this approach, very large emitters, like the United States, might not get any of the dwindling slice, on the ground that they’ve already gobbled up so much. An-

other way to allocate emissions would be to grant everyone on the planet an equal share of what’s left; in that case, the U.S. would still have to radically reduce its emissions, but not all the way down to zero. A third approach would be to focus on efficiency. It’s expensive to shutter power plants and factories that have already been built. But, as the cost of renewable energy declines, it may be cheaper to, say, put up solar panels than to construct a new coal plant. If growth can



truly be decoupled from emissions, then poor countries shouldn’t need to burn through lots of carbon in order to become wealthy.

The I.N.D.C.s obviate the need to agree on a single approach, or even to disagree. Each country brings its own proposal to the table, as if to a planet-wide potluck.

The U.S.’s plan is a peculiarly American confection. It consists of steps that the Obama Administration can take without the support of Congress, whose Republican leadership regards global warming as some kind of liberal plot. (The House Speaker, John Boehner, once called the idea that carbon-dioxide emissions are harmful “almost comical.”) New rules for cars and light trucks, issued by the Department of Transportation, are supposed to raise the fuel efficiency of the average vehicle to 54.5 miles per gallon over the next decade, and new rules on power-plant emissions, recently finalized by the Environmental Protection Agency, are expected to force the closure of dozens of the country’s least efficient coal-fired plants.

According to the Administration’s calculations, these new rules, coupled with stricter energy-efficiency standards for equipment and appliances, will lower U.S. emissions by at least twenty-six per cent by 2025. (This is against a baseline of 2005.) President Obama has said that this is an “ambitious goal, but it’s an

achievable goal.” Still, it will leave the world on track to burn through its two-degree budget within a matter of decades.

While Figueres was in New York, she attended a daylong meeting on climate change that had been called by the President of the U.N. General Assembly, Sam Kutesa, of Uganda. To such events, Figueres usually wears a Hillary Clintonesque outfit consisting of black slacks, black pumps, and a short, colorful jacket. (On this particular day, the jacket was teal.) As she made her way into the General Assembly building, she ran into China’s lead negotiator on climate issues, Xie Zhenhua. She joked to Xie that she was sure he had all the solutions in his pocket.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Xie answered, laughing nervously, once the joke had been conveyed to him by his translator.

“I believe that, under your leadership, success is a must,” he told Figueres.

“Under everyone’s leadership,” she responded.

The meeting began with speeches by various dignitaries, including Anote Tong, the President of Kiribati. A collection of islands sprinkled across the central Pacific, Kiribati is, for the most part, only a few feet above sea level, and the nation has already bought land in Fiji as an insurance policy against rising sea levels.

“For far too long, we have spoken of climate change as the most significant challenge,” Tong said. “But what have we really achieved? What have we done about it?”

Before Figueres took her turn at the lectern, she carefully went through a print-out of her remarks, crossing out the word “carbon” and replacing it with “emissions.” Again, she began by assuring the crowd—a mixture of climate negotiators, foreign ministers, and the occasional President—that a deal would be struck in Paris.

“In this moment, a climate-change agreement is emerging,” she said. Then she switched registers: “There is much political will already being displayed. But time is running out. And we must now turn that political will into clear leadership.” She went on, “Ministers, this is your moment. Ministers here today, you and your peers, this is your moment.”

The “bottom up” approach has reduced the chances of an impasse, but it

has not eliminated them. In the language of diplomacy, anything in brackets has yet to be agreed upon. The official negotiating text for the Paris COP is currently eighty-five pages long, and virtually everything in it remains in brackets, including the first word, "Preamble." Ten days of negotiations that were held in Bonn in June succeeded in paring the text down by just four pages; at this rate, to arrive at a treaty of, say, twenty pages would take months of non-stop talks. In his speech to the U.N. gathering, the Secretary-General complained, "The key political issues are still on the table."

One of these issues is money. The hundred billion dollars a year that was promised in Copenhagen to poor countries is supposed to go partly toward helping them adapt to warming and partly toward financing climate-friendly energy systems. But almost everything about the financing remains unresolved, including where the cash will come from and what sorts of projects it will go toward. So far, wealthy nations have committed only about ten billion dollars to what's been dubbed the Green Climate Fund; this includes three billion dollars that the Obama Administration has pledged but, because of congressional opposition, may not be able to make good on.

"There has to be a clear delivery of financial resources, because countries like us, we have very ambitious plans," Amjad Abdulla, the chief negotiator for a group of low-lying nations, the Alliance of Small Island States, told me by phone from Maldives. "If we have to go back to communities and say, 'We couldn't get the money,' that's where they get furious."

"From a developing country's perspective, finance is going to be a deal-maker or a deal-breaker," Tosi Mpanu-Mpanu, a member of the negotiating team from the Democratic Republic of Congo, told me. "It is going to be the ultimate test of good faith."

Another issue is what's become known as "the gap." To hold warming to less than two degrees Celsius, global emissions would have to peak more or less immediately, then drop nearly to zero by the second half of the century. Alternatively, they could be allowed to grow for a decade or so longer, at which point they'd have to drop even more precipitately, along the sort of trajectory a person would follow falling off a cliff. In ei-

ther case, it's likely that what are known as "negative emissions" would be needed. This means sucking CO₂ out of the air and storing it underground—something no one, at this point, knows how to do. The practical obstacles to realizing any of these scenarios has prompted some experts to observe that, for all intents and purposes, the two-degree limit has already been breached.

"The goal is effectively unachievable" is how David Victor, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, and Charles Kennel, a professor at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, put it recently in the journal *Nature*.

Even those who, like Figueres, argue that the goal is still achievable acknowledge that the I.N.D.C.s aren't nearly enough to achieve it. "I've already warned people in the press," she told the gathering at Citigroup. "If anyone comes to Paris and has a eureka moment—'Oh, my God, the I.N.D.C.s do not take us to two degrees!'—I will chop the head off whoever publishes that. Because I've been saying this for a year and a half."

To deal with "the gap," many countries, as well as many of the groups that are unofficial participants in the negotiations, like Oxfam and the World Wildlife Fund, are pushing for what's become known as a "progression clause." This would commit countries to revising their I.N.D.C.s every five years, to make them more stringent. Among the countries that are opposing such a clause is Saudi Arabia.

"Players like the Saudis, like the Chinese right now, to be honest with you, are trying to water it down so you don't have a cycle of improvement," Jennifer Morgan, the global director of the climate program at the World Resources Institute, a research group, told me from her office in Berlin. "And that, I think, is the fight that's going to be the next three months. Do we get those kernels of integrity in the international agreement or not?"

On Figueres's last day in New York, I arranged to meet her at her hotel, not far from the U.N. It was a purely functional place, with no lobby or bar, so we went up to an empty lounge on the top floor, where there was a microwave and a coffee machine. Figueres made herself a cup of black tea with a tea bag

she'd brought from home. I'd brought along a list of questions on a piece of paper. A few minutes into our conversation, she took the paper from me and sketched out her vision of the future:



"I love this," she said. The straight line was supposed to represent economic growth, past and future, the curved line the rise and fall of greenhouse-gas emissions.

"That's where we are," she said, drawing a dot right at the point where the two lines were about to diverge. She gestured toward an office tower across the street: "I think you and I will be alive when that building, all of those windows, will be covered with very, very thin-film solar cells, so that the building can produce all the energy it needs and maybe more."

I asked what would happen if the emissions line did not, in fact, start to head down soon. Tears welled up in her eyes and, for a moment, she couldn't speak.

"Ask all the islands," she said finally. "Ask Bangladesh. We just can't let that happen. Do we have the right to deprive people of their homes just because I want to own three S.U.V.s? It just doesn't make any sense. And it's not how we think of ourselves. We don't think of ourselves as being egotistical, immoral individuals. And we're not. Fundamentally, we all have a morality bedrock. Every single human being has that."

Then she brightened: "You know, I think that this whole climate thing is a very interesting learning ground for humanity. I'm an anthropologist, so I look at the history of mankind. And where we are now is that we see that nations are interlinked, inextricably, and that what one does has an impact on the others. And I think this agreement in Paris is going to be the first time that nations come together in that realization. It's not going to be the last, because as we proceed into the twenty-first century there are going to be more and more challenges that need that planetary awareness. But this is the first, and it's actually very exciting. So I look at all of this and I go, This is so cool—to be alive right now!" ♦

MY BRAIN: THE ALL-HANDS MEETING

BY HALLIE CANTOR

ME: Hey, everyone, thanks for coming. This meeting is just to check in, get updated about what everybody's been working on in the first quarter of the day, and see how we're feeling about the future. Coffee, wanna kick us off?

COFFEE: Sure, thanks. So, my team's been pretty active in Q1. We started out with our regular one cup, and, you know, we weren't seeing immediate results. We're attributing that to a number of factors. Our target is developing a tolerance owing to her unemployment, plus we all know there've been some hiccups in the new sleep schedule—

(Sleep snorts. Coffee pauses.)

COFFEE: —but we're hoping to hit the ground running in Q2 with the second-cup initiative, and build on the foundation that Antidepressants set up.

ANTIDEPRESSANTS: Yeah, thanks, Coffee. Can I get that PowerPoint I e-mailed everyone up on the screen, please? Great. Now, as you can see, our department's not getting the full R.O.I. we once were. Forty milligrams of Cymbalta used to be enough to get her out of bed and to a coffee shop, but increasingly—especially with the overwhelming trend toward mobile—she's just checking her e-mail on her phone and then going back to sleep.

SLEEP: Can I jump in here?

ME: Sure, Sleep, let's hear from you.

SLEEP: Listen, I know my department has been asking for a lot recently. But what do you want me to say? She's unemployed now. That's a new climate for all of us. We've had to adapt. Her sleeping patterns are being completely recalibrated. Seven hours a night isn't gonna fly. We need nine, ten, even eleven hours now.

COFFEE *(under its breath)*: Ridiculous.

SLEEP: And I hate to say it, but, as we enter Q2, the fact is we need a nap.

(Assorted grumbles and groans can be heard around the room.)

SUGAR: We don't need a nap, O.K.? What we need is a pastry.

PROTEIN: Absolutely not. A pastry is a Band-Aid solution! We need scrambled eggs.

ME: Guys, come on. I can't get into



this with you two again before lunch. Let's circle back to Coffee's second-cup initiative. Water, how does that look from your end?

WATER: I'm gonna have to strongly advise against it. If the first cup didn't work, why would we double down on that strategy and sink more resources into a second cup? Besides, my team's projections show that more coffee would frankly be counter to our goals at this point.

COFFEE: Excuse me?

WATER: She's tired because she's *dehydrated*. It's always dehydration! How many articles from the Huffington Post's Healthy Living vertical does her mom need to forward her before this sinks in?

COFFEE *(sulkily)*: There's water in coffee, you know.

EXERCISE: I'm with Water. The work my guys are doing is pointless without support in the form of more water! All through Q1, we were busting our ass at yoga class and she couldn't get any of the benefits because she was feeling light-headed

from a single Sun Salutation. That's textbook dehydration. I'm sorry, but it is.

SUGAR: Could be low blood sugar.

EXERCISE: It's not.

SUGAR: It could be, though.

WATER: It's not.

ME: All right, let's cool it with the crosstalk, please. I want to go big picture. None of us can deny the negative trends we've been seeing in mood and productivity. Let's do a deep dive. Therapy, what do you have to say?

THERAPY: I know things look stagnant right now, but it's a process. We're pursuing a long-term strategy, and sometimes things have to get worse before they get better. If we just stay the course—

ANTIDEPRESSANTS: Oh, stuff it.

THERAPY: Hey!

ANTIDEPRESSANTS: I'm sick of this asshole taking credit for the work I'm doing! Therapy, have you *ever* gotten concrete results?

THERAPY: I'm dealing with challenges that the rest of you have never had to handle! An off-site partner is not easy to work with, you know. Her Subconscious couldn't even be bothered to dial in to this meeting.

ME: We tried. The connection was bad.

THERAPY: What else is new?

ME: Look, excuses and finger-pointing aren't going to solve anything. Does anyone have any constructive ideas?

(A calm, wise voice speaks up from the back of the room.)

MEDITATION: Pardon me, but may I make a suggestion? If you'd consider bringing me on full time instead of employing me on a sporadic freelance basis, I really think I could help out with some of these issues.

ME: Yeah, yeah. Maybe next quarter. *(Alcohol clears its throat.)*

ALCOHOL: I know you already know that we're all dying to contribute more consistently over in my department.

WEED: Ditto.

ME: Thanks, guys. I appreciate that.

WATER: Tell me you're not considering putting those jackasses in charge.

ME: Not in charge. Just . . . maybe they should have a place at the table. Would that be so terrible?

(Suddenly, the door to the conference room bursts open.)

P.M.S.: Sorry, sorry, sorry! Am I late?

ME: Fuck it. Sleep, you're in charge. ♦

STARTING OVER

Many Katrina victims left New Orleans for good. What can we learn from them?

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

The first time that David Kirk visited New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina was at the end of 2005. His in-laws were from the city. Kirk and his wife visited them at Christmas, just four months after the storm hit, and then went back again on several more occasions throughout 2006. New Orleans was devastated. Thousands had fled. “I’ll admit I’d drive around the Lower Ninth, taking it all in, feeling a little guilty about being the gawking

are hard to untangle. As Kirk drove around the Lower Ninth, however, he realized that post-Katrina New Orleans provided one of those rare occasions when fate had neatly separated the two variables. In the course of bringing immeasurable suffering to the people of New Orleans, Katrina created what social scientists call a “natural experiment”: one day, people were in the neighborhoods where they had lived, sometimes for generations. The next

largely black, largely poor. For years, their pattern was to return to their old neighborhoods after they were released: to their families, homes, social networks. But for some, by the most random of circumstances, that was now impossible. Their neighborhoods—the Lower Ninth, New Orleans East—had been washed away. How did the movers compare with the stayers?

“This was December, 2006,” Kirk recounted. “I asked for a few things. I wanted information on where prisoners were living prior to Katrina. And I also wanted information on where they were living after release. I basically got an address file from the Department of Corrections for everyone who came out of prison from 2001 to 2007. It was extremely messy. They don’t necessarily collect data in a way that makes it easy to geo-code. There



Social scientists find that leaving a dysfunctional urban neighborhood can transform a family’s prospects.

tourist,” Kirk said not long ago. “It made an impression on me. These neighborhoods were gone.”

Kirk is a sociologist at the University of Oxford. He trained at the University of Chicago under Robert Sampson, and, for Sampson and the small army of his former graduate students who now populate sociology departments around the world, neighborhoods are the great obsession: What effect does where you live have on how you turn out? It’s a difficult question to answer because the characteristics of place and the characteristics of the people who happen to live in that place

day, they were gone—sometimes hundreds of miles away. “They had to move,” Kirk said. What, he wondered, were the implications of that?

“I worked my connections to see who would talk to me,” Kirk went on. “It turned out that one of my colleagues at the University of Maryland had done research on boot camps in Louisiana. Ultimately, I got in touch with someone who is now the head of the prison system, a guy named James LeBlanc.” Kirk’s idea was to look at convicted criminals from New Orleans who had been released from prison after Katrina. As a group, they were fairly homogeneous:

would be notes like “This is grandma’s telephone line.” I went line by line to clean it up.” He wound up with a list of three thousand individuals. His interest was recidivism: Were those people who came out of prison and found their entire world destroyed more likely or less likely to end up back in prison than those who could go home again? Kirk looked first at the results one year and three years after release and has since been working on an eight-year study. The results aren’t even close. Those who went home had a recidivism rate of sixty per cent. Those who couldn’t go home had a rate of forty-

PHOTOGRAPH, COURTESY CAROL M. HIGHSMITH
ARCHIVE/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

five per cent. They moved away. Their lives got better.

"This spring, I was on a radio talk show in Houston, Sunday morning," Kirk said. "This guy was listening. He called me up. He is a crack addict, with multiple incarcerations for burglary and theft. This is a guy who grew up in Arkansas, didn't have a very good childhood. He went down to Louisiana, and spent his entire adult life in New Orleans. Then he moved to Houston. I don't know his exact age, maybe a fifty-year-old black male. And this is what he told me: 'Now, I hate that the storm came because a lot of people died in the storm, but, guess what, that was probably the best thing that could have happened to a lot of people, because it gave them the opportunity to reinvent themselves if their life wasn't going right.'"

New Orleans is a city framed by two major bodies of water. Its northern edge is Lake Pontchartrain, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Running through the southern part of the city is the Mississippi. Connecting the two—lake and river—is the Industrial Canal, built almost a century ago. It runs right down the middle of the Ninth Ward, separating the Upper Ninth, which includes the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods of the Bywater, from the Lower Ninth, a smaller, isolated rectangle on the eastern edge of the city.

The most affluent parts of the city are on the river side: the Garden District, Uptown, the St. Charles and Magazine Street arteries. This is the historic New Orleans of grand houses, Audubon Park, and Tulane University. Richard Campanella, a geographer at the university, calls the area the "white teapot" of New Orleans—"teapot" for the way it follows the curving path of the Mississippi. As a delta plain, New Orleans has the curious effect of building uphill toward the river, so the teapot is on high ground. East and north of the teapot is Central City. It is almost all black. "Historically, the Central City population tends to be post-emancipation, urban migrants, coming in from the plantation regions, sugarcane fields, and the cotton fields in Mississippi and upriver," Campa-

nella said. "They were more likely to be Protestants, more likely to be 'Anglo' African-Americans—English-speaking, etc." Campanella was in his office at Tulane, the heart of the white teapot. Central City was a ten-minute drive away, but it could have been across the ocean. Beyond Central City is Treme. The historical roots of Treme are much older—in the black Creole communities that date back to French and Spanish colonial times. "Many are descendants of the free-people-of-color population," Campanella said. "Many of them were in the skilled trades, many of them professionals. They had a bit of access to the middle class."

Using census data, Campanella has created a computerized map of New Orleans, in which the city is divided up into thousands of little squares—each representing a city block and each color-coded according to the predominant race of that specific area's residents. He put the map up on his computer screen and pointed to the river side of the Lower Ninth. "Up until the nineteen-sixties, you would have seen mostly working-class to middle-class ethnic whites living here," he said. "After school integration, we had white flight over here"—he highlighted St. Bernard's Parish, directly across the city line—"at which point the Lower Ninth became about ninety-five per cent black." He pointed to the Seventh and Eighth Wards. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, blacks from neighborhoods like Treme moved upward toward the lake, to places like Pontchartrain Park and Gentilly. The whites who had been there moved to the suburbs. "There was a very rapid turnaround," Campanella said. The lines between black and white hardened, and, for a generation, New Orleans was laid out like a checkerboard. If you were African-American and lived in Central City or Treme or the Lower Ninth, chances were that your parents lived there, too, and maybe even your grandparents—perhaps even in the same house.

What Campanella was describing in New Orleans is the classic pattern of African-American demographic mobility. For crucial periods of this country's history, African-Americans were far more likely than whites to be

mobile—to move across state or regional lines. New Orleans was shaped by the first of those waves: the former plantation slaves who moved to urban areas after emancipation. The second of those waves was the Great Migration, extending into the middle of the last century, when hundreds of thousands of African-American families in the South made the long journey to the industrialized North in search of economic opportunity.

But from 1970 to the present the reverse has happened. Black Americans are much more likely to stay in place and much less likely than whites to engage in what the sociologist Patrick Sharkey calls "contextual mobility"—moves significant enough to change circumstances and opportunities. Robert Sampson once mapped the movement of African-Americans participating in a Chicago housing experiment over a seven-year period starting in the mid-nineteen-nineties, and the graphic consists of tight clusters of very short lines—spanning a few city blocks, or extending one or two neighborhoods over. How often do African-Americans from the poorest neighborhoods of the South Side leave the city of Chicago? "Rarely," Sharkey said.

What happens instead is "churning"—minor moves in which the new home pretty much replicates the environment and the conditions of the old home. The sociologist Stefanie DeLuca recently interviewed poor African-American families in Baltimore and Mobile about their reasons for moving, and No. 1 on the list was "unit failure": their home became so unlivable that they had no choice but to look for another place. They moved not because they were deliberately choosing a better life but because they had to—because the landlord evicted them, or the rent went up, or they suffered through a breakup, or there was a change in their housing subsidy. Here, from her research, is a typical response:

We had no heat. And I had just had my daughter. She was two weeks old. No heat. When he came and fixed it, a wire caught on fire inside of there, you know how sometimes you're supposed to put that black tape and stuff in there? And he rigged it up, it was

smoking in there. And I had just, I had brought my baby from the hospital that day. My daughter, and the wire, it was like, you know how a firecracker looks when you light it? That's how it was doing. I got so scared I grabbed her and ran out the door. Because it was going, okay, you know where all the wiring is in the top part of like a wall space heater, it was going up towards, I didn't know it was going to explode. And I'm like, I'm getting out of here. I didn't have no shoes on or nothing. I grabbed her, and I just ran out the door.

None of the reasons for moving that DeLuca collected are explicitly about schools or jobs, which are the kind of reasons that middle-class people give for moving. The exception is the 9.47 per cent of poor people's moves that are about "wanting to leave neighborhood conditions"—although one suspects that what was meant by "neighborhood conditions" is something different from what's meant when a young couple leave their walkup on the Upper West Side for a house in suburban New Jersey. African-Americans have become—to borrow the title of Sharkey's recent book—"stuck in place." Sharkey writes:

Over the past two generations, 48 per cent of all African American families have lived in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods in each generation. The most common experience for black families since the 1970's, by a wide margin, has been to live in the poorest American neighborhoods over consecutive generations. Only 7 per cent of white families have experienced similar poverty in their neighborhood environments for consecutive generations.

If a group of poor Americans are stuck in a bad place, then either the place they are stuck in needs to be improved or they need to move to a better place. Over the years, there have been numerous efforts to advance the second of these approaches—experimental projects, government initiatives—but they have been hard to execute on a large scale. Then came the storm.

Katrina blew in from the Gulf, bringing a storm surge across Lake Pontchartrain. Water squeezed through the city's navigation canals like a fire hose through a funnel, breaching the levees and flood walls that had been built to protect the city's low-lying neighborhoods. Pontchartrain Park and New Orleans East, where so many African-Americans had settled since the nineteen-sixties, were flooded. So were Tremé and Central City. Campa-

nella pointed to two spots along the Industrial Canal, which bisects the Ninth Ward. "The deepest floodwaters, the highest-velocity floodwaters, coming in from a two-hundred-foot-long breach right over here, and a nine-hundred-foot-long breach over here," he said, pointing to a flood wall that ran along the canal. "So the surge came in this way, from these man-made navigation canals as well as from the lake. It's piling up. It's putting pressure on these walls, and overtopping the levee and pouring in. In the canal, the water was fourteen feet above where it normally is. This land right here is four feet below sea level. So you have eighteen feet of head suddenly released."

By a combination of geography, history, and meteorology, Katrina disproportionately hit black New Orleans. These were the people whose homes were flooded, who camped out in the Superdome, who were evacuated to Baton Rouge or Lafayette or Houston—many of whom have never returned. The Lower Ninth had twenty thousand people before Katrina. Five years afterward, there were six thousand. In Mid-City, there are still abandoned houses and empty lots. Many of these people may have wanted to come back right after the storm. But the public schools were shut down, the city's main public hospital was a wreck, and the city's public-housing projects were shuttered.

Campanella then switched to an identically constructed map, only this time based on 2010 census data, and in bits and pieces on the screen there was a simple and arresting picture of what Katrina meant. In the neighborhoods that were once a dense black, many of the little squares had thinned and turned gray. The sharp lines that once separated the teapot from Central City were now blurry: the white areas of the city were pushing north, into the vacuum left by the exodus. The Bywater was graying, as it gentrified still further. "Before Katrina, an American Community Survey estimate of New Orleans Parish population was four hundred and fifty-five thousand, and about sixty-eight per cent black," Campanella said. "Now the latest estimate is three hundred and eighty-four thousand, and it's about

sixty per cent black. The white population has largely reconstituted itself numerically. So if you do that math, we're talking about seventy-nine to eighty thousand fewer African-Americans." In the most traumatic manner possible, Katrina caused what social scientists normally consider a good thing—a major move—and that is why, a decade after it devastated the Gulf Coast, the storm continues to defy simple categorization.

"The main lesson of our analysis is that intergenerational mobility is a local problem," the economists Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez conclude in a landmark study of U.S. economic mobility, published last year. They mean that the things that enable the poor to enter the middle class are not primarily national considerations—like minimum-wage laws or college-loan programs or economic-growth rates—but factors that arise from the nature of your immediate environment. The neighborhoods that offer the best opportunities for those at the bottom are racially integrated. They have low levels of income inequality, good schools, strong families, and high levels of social capital (for instance, strong civic participation). That's why moving matters: going to a neighborhood that scores high on those characteristics from one that does not can make a big difference to a family's prospects.

Chetty and his co-authors established their point in a number of ways. Suppose, they said, you look at parents who earn in the first quintile—that is, the bottom fifth of the U.S. income distribution. What are the odds that one of their children will—by the time that child reaches adulthood—make it into the top fifth of the income distribution? Those odds, they found, vary dramatically from one city to the next. In San Jose, for example, the probability is 12.9 per cent. San Jose, clearly, has a lot of good neighborhoods. So does Salt Lake City, where the probability of a bottom-quintile-to-top-quintile shift is 10.8 per cent. At the other end of the spectrum is Charlotte, North Carolina, where the probability is 4.4 per cent: a poor child is almost three times more

likely to reach the top in San Jose than he or she is in Charlotte.

In a second analysis, Chetty and Hendren assigned a value to every major metro area in the country, according to how much more (or less) a child can expect to earn depending on the city where he or she grew up. The No. 1 urban area, by this measure, is Seattle, at 11.6 per cent: by the age of twenty-six, the child of a family in Seattle earning just above the poverty line will make 11.6 per cent more than would otherwise have been expected. The place bonus for Minneapolis is 9.7 per cent; in Salt Lake City, it is 9.2 per cent. Coming in last on the list of the hundred largest commuting zones in the country, by contrast, is Fayetteville, North Carolina, which has a place penalty of negative 17.8 per cent: the child of a poor person in that city will end up earning substantially less than he or she would otherwise have earned, simply by having been raised in Fayetteville.

One of the tragedies of Katrina was that so many of New Orleans' residents were forced to move. But the severity of that tragedy is a function of where they were forced to move to. Was it somewhere on the Salt Lake City end of the continuum? Or was it a place like Fayetteville? The best answer we have is from the work of the sociologist Corina Graif, who tracked down the new addresses of seven hundred women displaced by Katrina—most of them lower-income and black. By virtually every measure, their new neighborhoods were better than the ones they had left behind in New Orleans. Median family income was forty-four hundred dollars higher. Ethnic diversity was greater. More people had jobs. Their exposure to "concentrated disadvantage"—an index that factors in several measures of poverty—fell by half a standard deviation.

The women weren't going to Fayetteville but, rather, to places like Houston. "For low-income people in the South, Houston is a pretty darn great place," Hendren said. "It's not a beacon of phenomenal upward mobility like Salt Lake City. But it's kind of the Salt Lake City of the South." The odds of going from the bottom to the top in Houston are 9.3 per cent, which

puts it fifteenth out of the top fifty U.S. metro areas.

"I think that what's happening is that a whole new world is opening up to them," Graif said. "If these people hadn't moved out of the metro area, they would have done the regular move—cycling from one disadvantaged area to another. The fact that they were all of a sudden thrown out of that whirlpool gives them a chance to rethink what they do. It gives them a new option—a new metro area has more neighborhoods in better shape."

That is, more neighborhoods in better shape than those of New Orleans, which is a crucial fact. For reasons of geography, politics, and fate, Katrina also happened to hit one of the most dysfunctional urban areas in the country: violent, corrupt, and desperately poor. A few years after the hurricane, researchers at the University of Texas interviewed a group of New Orleans drug addicts who had made the move to Houston, and they found that Katrina did not seem to have left the group with any discernible level of trauma. That's because, the researchers concluded, "they had seen it all before: the indifferent authorities, loss, violence, and feelings of hopelessness and abandonment that

followed in the wake of this disaster," all of which amounted to "a microcosm of what many had experienced throughout their lives."

Katrina was a trauma. But so, for some people, was life in New Orleans before Katrina. In the Chetty-Hendren-Kline-Saez analysis, New Orleans has a bottom-to-the-top probability of 5.1 per cent, which is half a percentage point behind Detroit. And the place bonus/penalty for New Orleans? *Minus* 14.8 per cent, which puts it ninety-ninth out of the top hundred biggest urban areas in the country, ahead of only Fayetteville. "New Orleans?" Hendren said. "Horrible. Absolutely horrible. No question about it. It was one of the worst."

Claiborne Avenue runs across New Orleans from west to east. It crosses through the Ninth Ward and then up and over the Industrial Canal into the Lower Ninth. On the south side of Claiborne, on higher ground toward the river, is a small district known as Holy Cross. It did not suffer as much as the hard-hit part of the Lower Ninth on the lake side of Claiborne. After the hurricane, there were policy-minded recommendations to "shrink the footprint" of the



"Please, Steve, not the duck face."

city—meaning to let nature reclaim the lowest-lying and most vulnerable parts of New Orleans, like the Lower Ninth. That proposal went nowhere. To those who had lost their homes once, the idea of the city taking their homes away a second time—this time permanently—seemed unimaginably callous.

Today, from the Claiborne Avenue Bridge, you can see dozens of new homes, many of them built by the actor Brad Pitt's Make It Right organization: architect-designed, environmentally conscious, brightly painted creations sitting defiantly among neatly planted gardens. The city's response to the storm was to rebuild the Lower Ninth and the neighborhoods that run along the lakeshore in a bigger, more idealized form—just as the response of New York to 9/11 was to erect an even more massive collection of office towers on the site of the old World Trade Center.

The way New Orleans handled public education after Katrina was very different. New Orleans had one of the worst-performing public-school systems in the country: the year before the storm, sixty-two per cent of public-school students in the city were enrolled in a school rated F by the state of Louisiana. The government decided to start over. All of the city's public-school teachers were fired. Public education was changed—in the words of one city official—from “a school system” to “a system of schools.” In the most radical educational experiment in the country, students were allowed to apply anywhere they chose throughout the city, principals were given wide autonomy, and countless school buildings were renovated or rebuilt. The educational system, in the wake of a hurricane that battered its buildings, doubled down and finished the job itself.

“It has been tough,” said Rhonda Kalifey-Aluise, the C.E.O. of KIPP New Orleans Schools, part of a national educational network that has played a major role in the city's educational experiment. “We've had fourteen different moves of our schools from year to year, as renovations are happening. The kids have had to get on buses and ride all across town. I think that

THE SMALL COUNTRY

Unique, I think, is the Scottish *tartle*, that hesitation when introducing someone whose name you've forgotten.

And what could capture *cafuné*, the Brazilian Portuguese way to say running your fingers, tenderly, through someone's hair?

Is there a term in any tongue for choosing to be happy?

And where is speech for the block of ice we pack in the sawdust of our hearts?

What appellation approaches the smell of apricots thickening the air when you boil jam in early summer?

What words reach the way I touched you last night—as though I had never known a woman—an explorer, wholly curious to discover each particular fold and hollow, without guide, not even the mirror of my own body.

Last night you told me you liked my eyebrows. You said you never really noticed them before. What is the word that fuses this freshness with the pity of having missed it?

And how even touch itself cannot mean the same to both of us, even in this small country of our bed, even in this language with only two native speakers.

—Ellen Bass

if we had thought too much about what we were doing we probably wouldn't have done it. There were lots of risks.”

Kalifey-Aluise and several of her colleagues then began to spell out just what she meant by “tough.” Two weeks before the storm, KIPP had opened its first school in New Orleans, KIPP Phillips College Prep—a middle school in Gentilly, with a hundred and twenty students. Katrina scattered everyone. Jonathan Bertsch, who was an administrator at that first school, recalls, “We started getting phone calls from our students—because, of course, it's a KIPP school, and they have our numbers—from Atlanta, Chicago, and a lot from Houston, from the Astrodome. So we said, ‘We should go to Houston and find our students.’ I drove there, and I remember I picked everybody up at the airport, and we got the last room

that was open in the Astrodome Holiday Inn, which was the executive suite at the top. There were forty of us staying in that room.”

Bertsch and his colleagues spent a week walking through the shelters with signs: “Do you know anyone who went to KIPP Phillips?” Bertsch went on, “We found about twelve or fourteen of our original students, which out of a class of a hundred and twenty is pretty significant, because we're five hours away.” They teamed with people from KIPP's Houston schools, rounded up twenty-nine teachers (twenty-six of whom had been with the Teach for America program in New Orleans), and on October 3rd—just over a month after Katrina—opened New Orleans West College Prep, kindergarten through eighth grade.

“For our families, the typical experience was we would meet them in shelters like the Astrodome and they would

maybe transition toward a church shelter or be doubled up with a family,” Bertsch said. “Then maybe they would get a hotel voucher, and then maybe find a permanent apartment. A lot of our families were dealing with just trying to get their lives straight. The amount of trust and belief that families had in us was overwhelming. Because I would talk to families, and I’d be looking at a map and say, ‘You need to walk your child two blocks this way and two blocks this way and the bus will come’—and they had never met me, they don’t know who I am, and they’d never seen our school.” A year later, the KIPP organization moved back to New Orleans and started over, and, along with dozens of other groups, began the long task of rebuilding the city’s public-school system from the ground up.

Ten years in, the results of the experiment have been mixed. Test scores have not risen anywhere near as much as had been hoped, and dozens of problems have had to be solved on the fly. How, in a system like this, do you prevent some schools from cherry-picking students—dumping the difficult cases on someone else? How do you create a single, simple application process? How do you move that many students from one end of the city to the other, every morning? How do you respond to the communities that have lost the local schools they sent their children to for generations?

To critics, what happened to the city’s schools is sometimes portrayed in ideological terms—as “disaster capitalism.” Or it is seen as a class victory: a group of (largely) white, well-educated teachers came down and took over a (largely) black school system. At root, however, is something more fundamental—the flip side of the position taken by those who want to rebuild the Lower Ninth. Those who fought against shrinking the city’s footprint were motivated by the impulse to heal. The motivating force behind the school reforms was to fix. The first saw the storm as a trauma to be overcome. The second saw it as an opportunity to be exploited.

To the KIPP leaders, the sacrifices caused by the revolution were necessary. Given its past failures, what choice did the city’s school system have but to

try something new? As the KIPP officials were talking, they were sitting in a conference room at KIPP Central City Academy, a gorgeous, brand-new school in Central City—and a sharp contrast with the forbidding, battered building that KIPP occupied before the storm. The first crop of KIPP graduates are now moving on to college at a ninety-three-per-cent rate. Joining Bertsch and Kalifey-Aluise around the table was one of those graduates, Tyreal Samuel, who had been with KIPP nearly every step of the way. She was headed for Grinnell College, in Iowa, in the fall, and the unspoken implication of her presence was obvious: someone in her shoes coming out of the old New Orleans school system could only have dreamed of Grinnell.

A few years after Katrina, the economists Emily Chamlee-Wright and Virgil Henry Storr interviewed dozens of evacuees living in Houston, and what they found is an exact version of this divide between the healers and the fixers. Those who preferred New Orleans to Houston gave as their reasons:

New Orleans is home: 69%.
Prefer New Orleans’ unique culture: 49%.
Overall quality of life better in New Orleans: 35%.
Family/friendship networks in New Orleans: 27%.
Better transportation in New Orleans: 24%.
People are friendlier in New Orleans: 18%.

The members of this group put family and continuity first: they wanted their community back. “We sit down, we barbecue, we have our crawfish,” one of the returnees from Houston told Chamlee-Wright and Storr. “I went out there today and washed the pot out, we barbecued last week. It’s just something we do. We get off work early, go spend \$30, \$40, \$50, \$60, buy a sack of crawfish, cook them, and sit outside and eat. Like I said, that’s just New Orleans. That’s what we couldn’t do when we went to Houston.”

Those who preferred Houston saw things very differently:

Better schools in Houston: 35%.
Found a better job in Houston: 35%.
Overall quality of life in Houston: 33%.

Lower crime in Houston: 31%.
Better housing in Houston: 27%.
Better access to health care in Houston: 21%.

There is value in both positions. If places like Salt Lake City have great neighborhoods, it is in part because of culture and community. The attitudes of reformers in places like New Orleans sometimes bring to mind the absurdist adage of the Vietnam War: that a village needed to be destroyed in order to be saved. Nor can everyone move. Patrick Sharkey points out the sad fact about moving as a primary strategy: if too many poor African-Americans move into a middle-class neighborhood, then the middle class leaves—robbing the community of many of the things that the movers came in search of.

At the same time, however, Katrina reminds us that sometimes a clean break with the past has its advantages. The fact that you may have lived in a neighborhood for generations, or become attached to a set of long-standing educational traditions, does not mean that you should always return to that neighborhood if you are displaced, or reconstruct those traditions. The schools of New Orleans made a necessary and painful sacrifice: they extended the pain of Katrina in order to build a better future for the city’s children. Those who chose to stay in Houston made the same hard choice. The calculations done in the Chetty-Hendren-Kline-Saez study concern the benefits of good neighborhoods for the children of the people who move. The child who moves from Central City to Salt Lake City at the age of five or six gets the benefit of all of his or her education in a better school, an adolescence largely free of violence and crime, and an early adulthood in a place with jobs and opportunities. The benefits are less obvious for the parents: they leave behind their networks and family ties and the pleasures of crawfish. In the past ten years, much has been said, rightly, about the resilience and the spirit of those who chose to rebuild the neighborhoods they had lost. It is time to appreciate as well the courage of those who, faced with the same disaster, decided to make a fresh start. ♦

PORTFOLIO BY ALEC SOTH

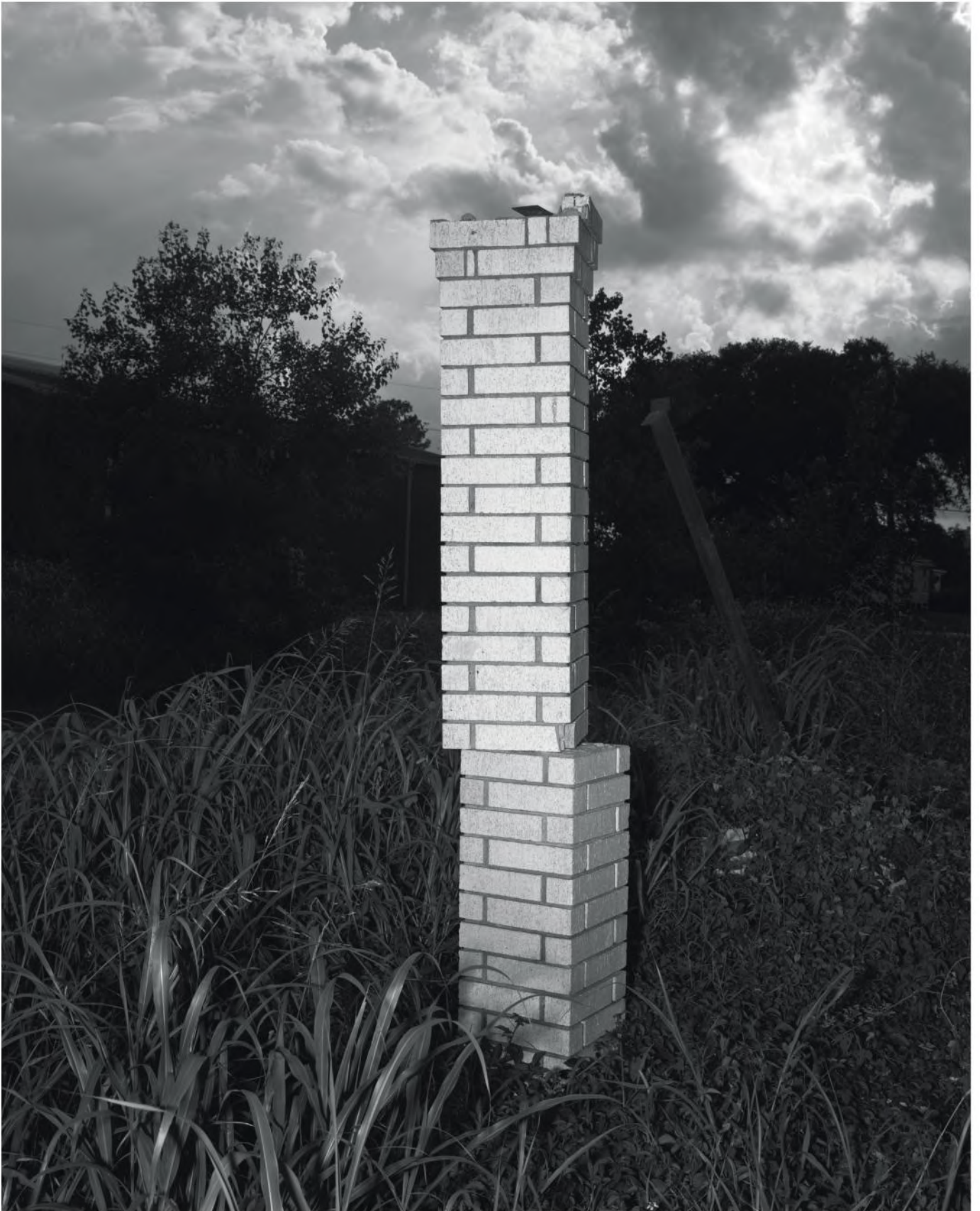
CITY OF WATER

In 1880, the inveterate traveller and journalist Lafcadio Hearn was living in New Orleans and writing for a couple of local papers, the *Daily City Item* and the *Times-Democrat*. Hearn sensed what so many before and after him have, that New Orleans exists in a state of insidious disintegration—“crumbling into ashes”—thanks to its perilous geography and its “frauds and maladministrations.” And yet, Hearn wrote to a friend, “it is better to live here in sackcloth and ashes than to own the whole state of Ohio.” New Orleanians have always resembled New Yorkers; they tend to share the sense that to live anywhere else would lead inevitably to a stultifying and pitiable existence beyond the bounds of understanding.

In part, the spirit of New Orleans is rooted in the city’s below-sea-level precariousness, the condition of looking out—and even up—at the water all around you, the knowledge that water saturates the ground you stand on. Katrina, the ferocious hurricane that devastated the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, tested the self-possession of every citizen who survived it. More than eighteen hundred people did not survive it, and hundreds of thousands lost their homes. The storm, and the terrible flooding that followed—a natural disaster exacerbated by a range of man-made disasters—revealed much that had been fragile, or rotten, in Hearn’s time and grew worse with every decade: shoddy civil engineering; corrupt and feckless government institutions; and, it turned out, an Administration in Washington that for days witnessed a city drowning—a largely black city drowning—and reacted with galling indifference. And yet, in the face of abandonment—in hospitals, on rooftops, on highway overpasses—the residents of New Orleans behaved with resilience. Rebecca Solnit, an acute observer of Katrina and its aftermath, has written, “The belief that a Hobbesian war of all-against-all had broken loose justified treating the place as a crime zone or even a hostile country rather than a place in which grandmothers and toddlers were stranded in hideous conditions, desperately in need of food, water, shelter and medical attention.”

Alec Soth, a photographer who lives in Minneapolis and travels the Midwest and the South with the energy of a latter-day Walker Evans, did not join the artists who came to New Orleans a decade ago to capture what he calls the “eye candy of decay and ruin.” Instead, he waited, preferring to capture the city of water ten years later, a city in a state of both persistent suffering and persistent renewal. Soth shows us the unnerving image of a freestanding column—all that is left of a house in the hard-hit Lower Ninth Ward—but he moves toward a vision of promise, a lonely figure at his leisure, staring into the waters of today’s New Orleans.

—David Remnick



A brick column is all that remains of a house on Choctaw Street, in the Lower Ninth Ward.



Members of the Brooks family, at Lake Pontchartrain, most of whom were evacuated

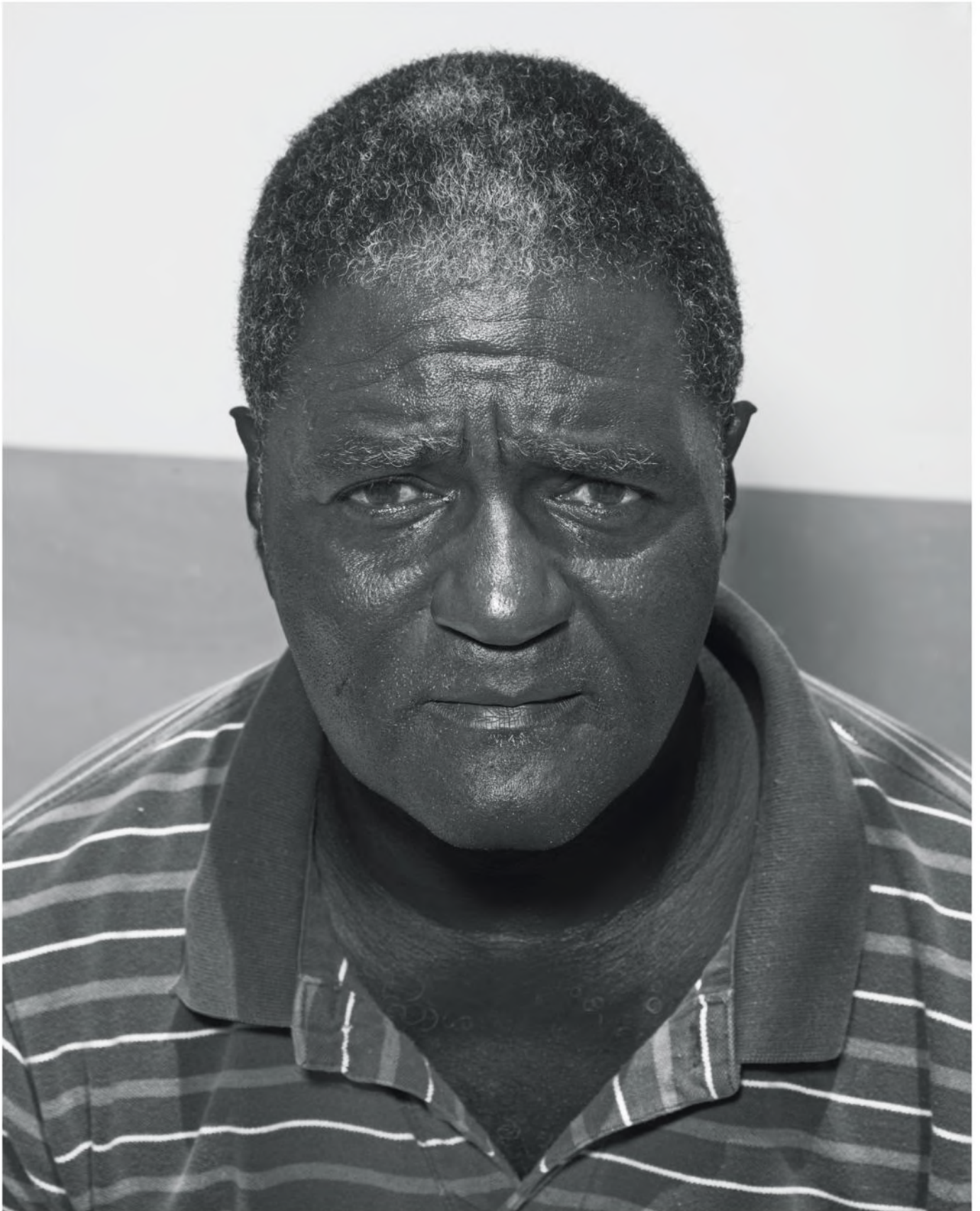


MAGNUM

from the city. It was six months before they could return to rebuild their house.



The Industrial Canal levee, at one of the breach points that inundated the Lower Ninth Ward.

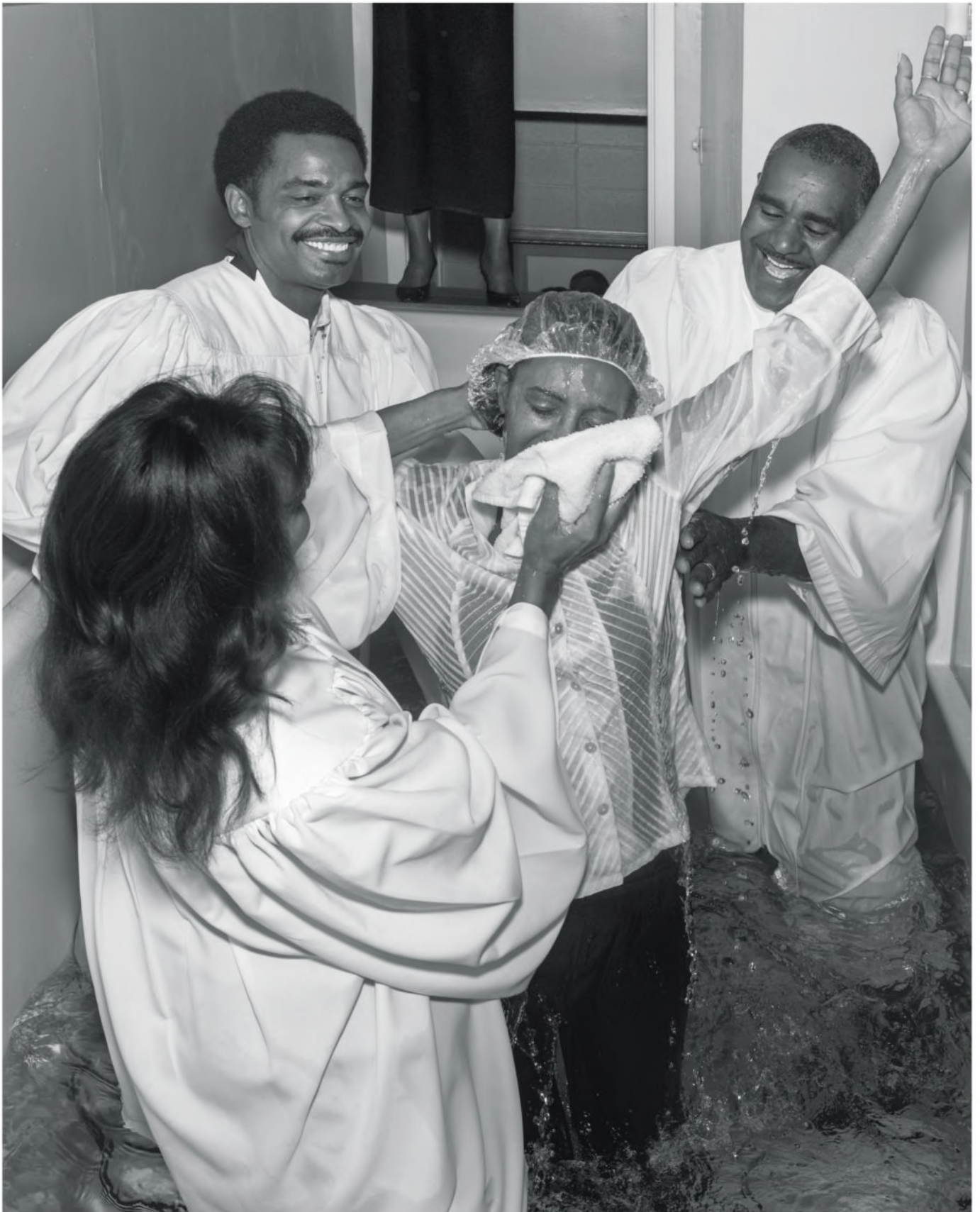


Jackie Riley is a shrimper whose boat was destroyed. He rebuilt it, but now also works in a coal plant.



The Country Club, in Bywater. Many of the African-American residents of the neighborhood were displaced by Katrina, and, during the past decade, young white artists and professionals have moved in.





A baptism at the Macedonia Full Gospel Baptist Church, in the Irish Channel neighborhood.



Dan Tullis, crabbing in Slidell, on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.



Encroaching saltwater has killed many trees, creating “ghost forests.”



*Mike Henderson fishing on
the Mississippi River where it
meets the Industrial Canal.*



THE YELLOW HOUSE

A decade after the storm, my mother still can't go home.

BY SARAH M. BROOM

In early spring, before the Jane magnolia tree bloomed, I set off to close the distance between the me of now and the me of then. When I made the drive to New Orleans from upstate New York, where I live now, I began as I had dozens of times before, from various starting points, cradling a longing to see what, if anything, had changed. These returns always seem necessary, as if I were a rubber band, stretched to its breaking point.

In the ten years since Hurricane Katrina, what has plagued me most is the unfinished business of it all. Why is my brother Carl still babysitting ruins, sitting on the empty plot where our childhood home used to be? Why is my seventy-four-year-old mother, Ivory Mae, still unmoored, living in St. Rose, Louisiana, at Grandmother's house? We call it Grandmother's even though she died ten years ago. Her house, the only one remaining in our family, is a squat three-bedroom in a subdivision just off the River Road, which snakes seventy miles along the Mississippi, where plantation houses sit alongside grain mills and petrochemical refineries.

On the evening of the second day, I arrive in New Orleans. I call Carl, who tells me to find him at the Yellow House, where we grew up. It was demolished a year after the water. None of us was there to see it go. When it came down, all seven of my siblings who lived in New Orleans were displaced. There are twelve of us in all, and I am the baby.

I exit the interstate in New Orleans East, fifteen miles from the French Quarter, at Chef Menteur, a highway named for a deceitful Choctaw Indian chief or an early colonial governor, depending on whom you ask.

There is no welcome sign here, nothing to signify the New Orleans of most people's imagination. The East, where

nearly twenty per cent of the city lives, lies in the shadow of more mythologized sections of New Orleans: the French Quarter, the Garden District, and even the Lower Ninth Ward, which became the drowned and abandoned symbol of the storm's destructive power. The totems—architecturally significant houses, second-line parades, and historical markers—are nearly nonexistent.

The East comprises more than half of New Orleans's geography, though it is mostly water: Lake Pontchartrain on one side, the Mississippi River on the other. To the west, the Industrial Canal, dredged in 1923 to make a commercial route between the lake and the river, is a watery bifurcation that divides the East from the rest of the city.

Chef Menteur slashes through the East, cutting some long streets off at their ends, creating impromptu cul-de-sac where sometimes only five houses exist. Chef severs a street called America, and splits Wilson Avenue, where I grew up, separating us from a mile-long line of handsome brick houses and from Jefferson Davis, my elementary school, which in 1993 was renamed for Ernest (Dutch) Morial, the city's first black mayor, but is now an empty field.

My sister Karen was struck by a car and dragged down the ruthless highway when she was nine years old and trying to get to third grade. She survived with skin grafts that formed islets on her arms and legs, and with faith in God.

For the past ten years, the only inhabitants of our side of Wilson Avenue have been our neighbor Rachelle and her two children, who live in a cream-colored shotgun house. Next door was our house, a narrow camel-back shotgun, with a second floor in

Ivory Mae bought the house in 1961, for thirty-two hundred dollars. She was nineteen, mother to three, and already widowed. To her, the area was the country.





the back that did not run the length of the house.

When I pull into the drive, I see Carl at the back of the lot, seated at a trestle table with several men. Carl sits here at least five times a week, when he is not fishing, or working his maintenance job at NASA, or tending his own house. In the past, I have arrived unannounced to find him sitting on an ice chest, a skinny man with socks pulled up to his kneecaps, a gold picture frame around his front tooth, searching the view.

This time, a light-skinned man named Mark is here, smoking a cigar. Another, Arsenio, rushes out to buy Popeyes chicken. Carl's son, a three-year-old whom we call Mr. Carl for how grown he acts, is here, too. Carl, six feet four, with a loping walk, stands and beckons me over. The top of my head kisses his armpit. "Welcome back, li'l sis," he says. Carl is fifty-two, my older brother by sixteen years.

Certain things have changed since I was last here, four months ago. The table rests on the concrete foundation that used to hold the house's den. Carl has painted the slab black. His Mardi Gras trailer and matching boil pots, large enough for several thirty-five-pound sacks of crawfish, have been painted orange and blue with streaks of yellow.

Carl asks if during my stay I'll "see what's happening with that Road Home." Louisiana's Road Home program, designed to return the displaced to permanent housing, has thus far led my family nowhere. The federally funded program has awarded nine billion dollars in grants to Louisiana residents to rebuild their homes and protect their property against storm damage in the future. But we fear losing the land. An unkempt lot could be reported as a public nuisance. If accused, we could be subject to legal proceedings and, worse, private shame for not attending to the only thing our mother has left. "This is still our land," Carl says.

I stay until the chicken arrives. Then the sun sets and the mosquitoes become too much.

Mom is calling by now anyway, happy to know that I have found Carl, less happy that we are on the lot. "Looks

like nothing was ever there," she has said. But when she feels like remembering she says, "That house was my beginnings."

My mother bought the Yellow House in 1961, for thirty-two hundred dollars. She was nineteen years old, mother to three, and already widowed. Her husband, Webb, an Army recruit, had been run over by a car near Fort Hood, in Texas, the year before.

Until the sixties, people called the land east of the Industrial Canal Gentilly or the Ninth Ward or the East. Then a development firm, New Orleans East, Inc., led by two Texas oilmen, Clint Murchison and Toddie Lee Wynne, bought thirty-two thousand acres of it. The area was to be a "city within a city," rising from swamplands, self-contained, with a population of two hundred and fifty thousand.

To my mother, who grew up on Roman Street, uptown, around the corner from Rex's Carnival den, New Orleans East was the country. When she first saw the house on Wilson, she thought little of it. A wooden house with a screened-in porch and two bedrooms, it was already sinking in the back.

For fifty dollars a load, a dump truck arrived with gravel and rocks and stones. No one was exempt from the work, even though my brothers were toddlers. Ivory Mae pushed wheelbarrows over planks laid down by Simon Broom, her second husband and my father.

She set out to make a garden that ran for a hundred and sixty feet along the side of the house, and planted camellias, magnolias, and mimosas—rain trees, they called them, for the way their pink flowers fell in drifts. She planted gladiolus and pink geraniums, as she had seen her mother, Amelia, do on Roman Street. Simon planted two cedar trees in front near the ditch that marked Wilson Avenue. Nothing had yet been paved.

They hung narrow black house numbers near the front door in a crooked vertical line. This is where we—the three children Simon Broom brought with him from his first mar-

riage, the three my mother already had, and the six they made together—grew up.

In August, 2005, my family scattered. I lived in a town house in Harlem, two doors away from my older sister Lynette. She had come to New York at nineteen for fashion school, but was making a living as a makeup artist. I worked at a national magazine. On the day we heard the hurricane warnings, Lynette and I were swinging out at the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival, in Marcus Garvey Park. While I was tapping my foot, my mother was evacuating with my sister Karen and her two children.

My brother Troy left his carpentry job early and was making his way to them. The confusion lent them time: everyone packed a single bag. My mother called the nursing home where Grandmother was an Alzheimer's patient, after realizing that there wouldn't be enough time to get her. The nursing home promised a speedy evacuation.

My brother Eddie called from the highway, on his way to Missouri, to say what everyone already knew: Get out. Ivory Mae and the others headed to a cousin's house in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. What was normally a two-hour drive became five. My sister Valeria drove east with her two daughters and their children. When she finally stopped driving, she was in Ozark, Alabama.

Carl and my brother Michael sat outside the Yellow House that day, grilling.

"You gotta realize," Carl told me later, "it's August, it's beautiful, a Sunday. I cut all the grass, weed-eated and everything, had it looking pretty."

He went on, "It got to be dark, eight or eight-thirty, still no rain or nothing." He packed up his ice chest and said goodbye to Michael, who left to meet his girlfriend at their house, on Charbonnet Street, in the Lower Ninth Ward. It was already too late; he knew they wouldn't be travelling far. They made their way to a friend's elevated apartment in the Lafitte Projects, in the Treme, where they slept outside on balconies.

Carl took Chef Menteur to his one-story house, just off Paris Road, in the East. Mindy and Tiger, his Pekinese dogs, greeted him at the door. The telephone

was ringing. "Mama and them kept calling, saying, 'Boy, get out of the house,'" he told me. He sat in his recliner and fell asleep so that the TV was watching him.

A little later, he woke and made small preparations. He had lived through Hurricane Betsy, in 1965. He knew what to do. He pulled the attic steps down and placed his hatchet and ice chest near them. He went back to bed.

"About three, four o'clock in the morning, the dogs in the bed scratching, licking on me," he said. "It's dark, you could hear it storming outside, sound like a freight train derailling. I put my feet down. Water."

He put Mindy and Tiger on the attic steps. "Stuff crashing, stuff flying. I can't see nothing, but I know the house.

"I go in the icebox, take the water out. Five minutes later it come off the ground. Floating. I got to go up now myself. I got pajamas on. I took a pair of jeans—I still got them jeans, my Katrina jeans." He climbed into the attic to wait. "I got my light on my head," he said. "That water coming higher and higher."

After five hours, it stopped.

My mother called me from Hattiesburg. She said, "Water is coming into the house. We're calling for help." The phone cut out right as she was speaking. For the next three days, those two lines kept replaying in my head—during half-sleep and at my job, where I pretended to have it together.

Water is. We are. Calling. Help.

Carl spent the night in the attic. In the morning, the water started rising again. He figured that the levees had collapsed or been blown up.

He took up his axe.

"I said, 'I got to get through this attic now.' Never panic—you can never panic. I'm cutting through that sucker. Once I got my head out, I looked around."

Men who were stranded on rooftops several houses down called out. It was beaming on the roof, but suffocating in the attic. He and the other men stayed up talking until about midnight. Someone told stories about alligators in the water, but Carl didn't know if that was the truth or just exhaustion speaking.

Back in the attic, the dogs ran wild, never sleeping.

After three days, Carl and another man started swimming. They reached an

apartment complex that housed the elderly. "We stayed there a couple of hours. One dude had food and was grilling and smoking cigarettes." Carl was hungry, but if he ate he would have to use the bathroom.

Days passed in this way, as Carl travelled between his roof and the apartment complex. From the roof, he could see the staging area on the interstate where boats dropped the rescued. "We knew they was eventually coming to get us, but you go to getting mad anyway," he said.

On his seventh day on the roof, rescuers arrived: "White guys from Texas on big old airboats." Carl was deposited on the interstate, and he set off toward the Convention Center, where people were taking refuge, using his shoelaces as leashes for the dogs.

Carl stayed on the perimeter of the Convention Center, watching the clamor from a distance. After days of observing the growing and agitated crowd, Carl and a few friends started walking back toward the interstate. At the base of the Orleans Avenue ramp, close to where he normally spent Mardi Gras, he found a boat with paddles.

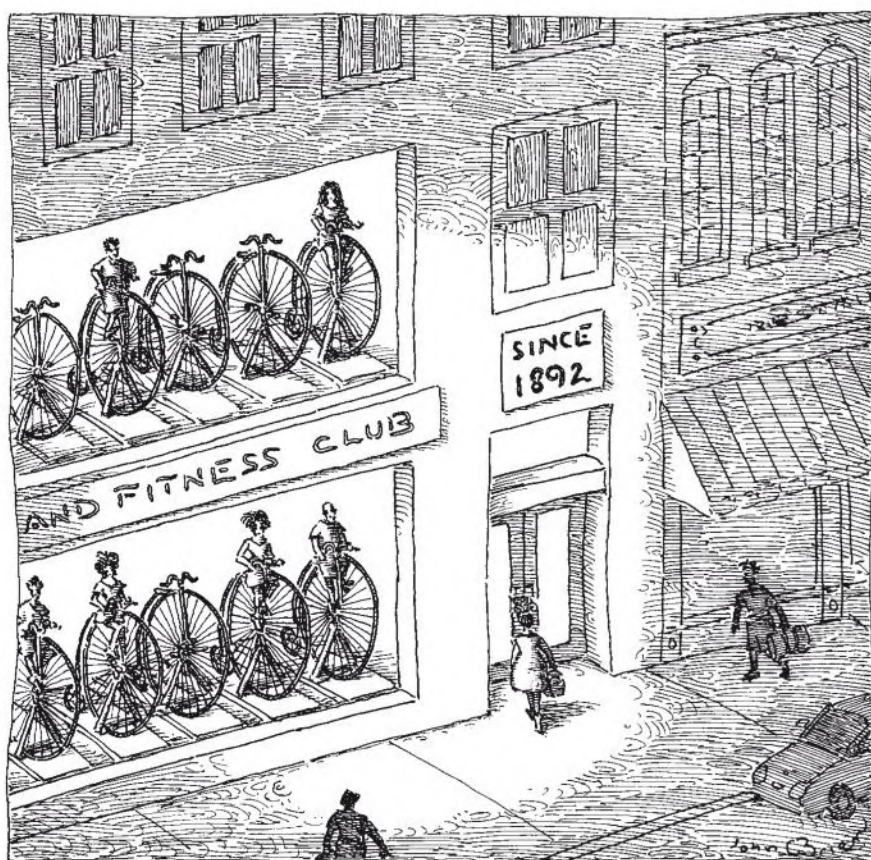
The men rowed down Orleans to Broad Street. That night, they stayed in

the boat, tethered to the huge metal roll-up gates of the Regional Transit Authority parking lot, stranded cars and buses just inside. "Just like we were fishing somewhere," Carl said.

The next morning, they made their way to the freeway bridge at Tulane and Broad, joining a long queue of boats. Inmates from the Orleans Parish Prison, in orange jumpsuits, were being evacuated by helicopter. Afterward, Carl headed to the top of the bridge with his dogs and climbed into a helicopter. "I'm home free now. I'm there now," he said when he saw Louis Armstrong International Airport, a few miles from Grandmother's house.

Inside the airport, people lay on stretchers and on luggage carts. Carl ate his first solid meal—red beans and rice—before he and the dogs walked a mile down Airline Highway to a cousin's house on the River Road. The cousin drove him the final mile to Grandmother's house, where the lights had never gone out.

To feel less helpless, I had flown to Vacaville, California, where my brother Byron lives. My mother and her crew had eventually made their way there, in the days after the storm. When Carl



finally called, after two weeks, we let out a collective sigh: *Cuuuuurrrrrrrl*.

It rained more than usual in the days after Carl got to Grandmother's house. He imagined water topping the levees nearby and stayed up all night watching. Even after the rain quit, the water could still do something, he knew.

His stomach hurt constantly and he suffered from headaches, but his physical ailments, he told himself, were due to the water. It just needed to run through him.

We heard from Michael a few days after Carl arrived at Grandmother's house. He had made it to San Antonio.

Three weeks later, Grandmother was still lost. Only a hundred and twenty of the nursing home's three hundred and seventy patients got out before the storm hit. A second group left three days later, on September 1st. By then, thirteen patients had died. Eventually, a cousin found Grandmother's name online: Amelia Williams, Briarcliff Health Center, Tyler, Texas. She had fallen ill; her organs were failing. Ivory Mae flew to Texas, arriving just hours before her mother died.

In late September, a month after the storm, my family gathered in St. Rose to bury Grandmother. We wanted to memorialize her in the *Times-Picayune*, but no one answered the phone at the newspaper.

A few days after the funeral, we drove to see the Yellow House. At the checkpoint on Chef Menteur, Carl flashed his NASA employee badge. "I'm legal," he said to the officer. At the house, my mother stayed in the car, hand cradling the side of her face, a surgical mask over her nose and mouth, while we poked our heads through its blown-out windows. The house had split in two—we could see straight through to the lavender-walled room that was once Lynette's and my childhood bedroom. The walls of the narrow house bulged toward us as if it were threatening to spill its guts. No one made a sound.

We went on to visit Carl's destroyed house. He was desperate to recover his weed-eater. My mother begged him, "Just leave it, Carl—I'll get you another one," but her voice was muffled by the mask.

As we looked on from below, Carl loped around the roof, his movements wild yet measured. We formed a semi-circle, as if poised to catch him. We were there, it is apparent now, as witnesses to what he had come through. To help him retrieve, in some way, the memory.

In May, 2006, when less than half of the New Orleanians displaced by the storm had returned, a letter was delivered to the Yellow House announcing its intended demolition. Our house was one of almost two thousand on the Red Danger List. These houses bore

bright-red stickers no larger than a child's hand.

The notice read, in part, "Dear Ms. Bloom: This serves as your official notification that the City of New Orleans intends to demolish and remove the home/property and/or remnants of the home/property located at 4121 Wilson Avenue. . . . THIS IS THE ONLY NOTIFICATION YOU WILL RECEIVE. Sincerely, Law Department-Demolition Task Force."

That June, the house was demolished without our knowing it. Everyone in my family had been displaced—to Texas, Alabama, California, and Mississippi—and Carl was in the hospital, undergoing surgery for twisted intestines. The only person to see the house razed was our next-door neighbor, Rachele, who took a Polaroid that she lost and never found. "That land clean as a whistle now," my mother said. "Looks like nothing was ever there."

When the Yellow House fell down, so did, in a way, the view I had of my father. In the summer of 1980, six months after I was born, he died in its small bathroom, of a brain aneurysm. My mother discovered him on the toilet, blood draining from his ear. He had built the house's second story, where the boys ruled. He was a man prone to beginning but not to finishing, and so what I knew of his labors were the temporary stairs that remained in place and the upstairs closet that was meant to contain a bathroom, where I used to hide as a child. From the window there, I looked down on my brothers—Byron and Troy and Carl, sometimes Michael or Darryl or Eddie—while they slept or lifted weights or polished sneakers or ironed creases into their jeans. Sometimes I stayed in the closet for hours while the boys were away, peering down at nothing, stuffed between shoeboxes, hats, and suits.

These trips home recall for me the lull of those days. It is partly this: I have no friends to visit, and few outside of my family to call. Most of the people I grew up with are either in prison or buried in the cemetery. This was true before August 29, 2005. Now there is even less to find. Still, I follow the traces, driving alone through a pockmarked New Orleans East.

In my teen-age years, I yearned to belong to the "real" New Orleans,



"You can't hide our relationship forever."

twenty minutes away. My brothers and sisters found jobs there, and so did I, working in ice-cream shops and cafés on the Riverwalk and on Jackson Square. Those of us who worked in the French Quarter and lived elsewhere recognized one another by our stained uniforms, which could feel like marks of dishonor as we walked to catch buses home.

In the eighties, the oil bust set into motion a disinvestment from which the East never recovered. The New Orleans East firm pulled out. The Plaza Shopping Center, which had drawn customers from all over, travelling there on the newly built interstate, lost three of its four flagship stores. White flight happened, and the Red Barn, which had blared country music, became the Ebony Barn. The skating rink closed down and so did the movie theatres. New Orleans East came to be seen as a no man's land, and crime soared.

These events gave new meaning to a proclamation made in a pamphlet commissioned by the developers in boom times: "If ever the future can be studied from the past, New Orleans, augmented by its last remaining section, is surely destined for a tomorrow that neither the facile pen of the journalist nor the measured phrases of a lawyer can express. Posterity will certainly look upon it one day and say, 'What hath God wrought.'"

My mother and I make the trip to the Road Home office, where even the caseworker is surprised that we're still in limbo. It's too late, he says—they're closing down the program. I plead and insist: my mother was sixty-four when the process began; she's seventy-four now.

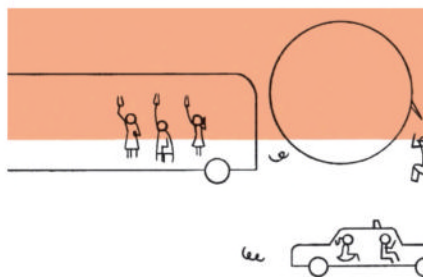
As long as we owned the land, my mother could sell it to Road Home in exchange for a grant that would allow her to buy another home. But the program had become an endless loop, bungled and exhausting, seemingly designed to wear you out. My mother tried to make it go. So did my brother Eddie, who has a big job at an oil plant where daily he makes things go.

Because we children were all part owners of the Yellow House, we had to transfer our stakes to my mother. The law firm contracted by Road Home to

close the file suddenly changed. Its requests for materials were unclear. My mother would call me in New York, speaking in vague avoidance: "Those people said they need another paper or something." Without the means to hire lawyers, very little advanced.

Days before I arrived, my mother called the law firm and was told that her case had been closed for nonresponsiveness. They had made a single unanswered call.

I tell all of this to the caseworker. My



mother stays silent, peeking at the man as if from behind a veil. We take all the required steps to reopen the case. The caseworker promises that he'll do his best—he seems hopeful—but we've heard nothing since then about the status of our case, which is really the question of whether my mother will ever live in her own house again.

Recently, the city notified us that our property would be sold for nonpayment of back taxes if we did not appeal within sixty days. My mother called me, upset, saying, "You know I'm not all that business-minded." All I could think was to call the Road Home number and leave another message. "Please tell us what to do," I said.

Until we know, we tend the property. We are cutting grass for the look of it. From above, where the survey images are taken, this would not show.

As usual, people stop by the spot where they know Carl will be. Everyone is dressed up as if going somewhere. Mr. Carl's mom wears a pink visor and matching pants with a gold-and-pink pocketbook resting on one leg. Mr. Carl sits on the other.

"You never came to our Yellow House?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

Michael says, "They got a tree right here, a tree right there," referring to the

cedar trees that once framed the front door.

She strains to see.

After a while, the sun waned and Carl climbed on the mower. He drove a bit and then asked if I wanted to cut the grass. He sat at the trestle table, where the front of the house had been, and yelled directions. "Push that clutch in!" he called. The mower stuttered and quit.

Someone yelled, "Go 'head, cut that grass!"

At the back of the lot, the view opened up in a way I had never seen. I imagined the time before the houses, when this was marshland, and the time long after that, when my sister Deborah had her wedding reception here. That morning, my father cut the grass to submerge his nerves, and then all of my brothers set up the tables and chairs before my mother laid out the lace tablecloths that she had sewn.

Cutting grass could seem so simple an act, but Carl was drawing a line around what belonged to us. As long as we had the ground, and as long as we kept him company, we were not homeless, which was Carl's definition of tragedy. What will happen when the case is resolved, our house replaced by another house on another lot? Will we ever shake the precarious nature of finding home? I think of all the sentinels, like Carl, who still tend to the remains of what used to be and who have not found a place on earth where they might settle down. I count myself as one.

The evening of my last day in New Orleans, the family gathered at Grandmother's house. I packed my car with acquired things, mostly plants my mother has grown, things that don't have a chance of surviving northern temperatures. I took them anyway. They remind me of a photograph I love: my mother standing on her land, between the two shotgun houses, a hoe in one hand, a pulled weed in the other, hair a bit wild, her arms open, as if saying, "Ta-da!"

I drove away before sunrise the next morning, as if possessed, completing the fourteen-hundred-mile stretch to New York without stopping for the night, feeling that everything and absolutely nothing was behind me. ♦



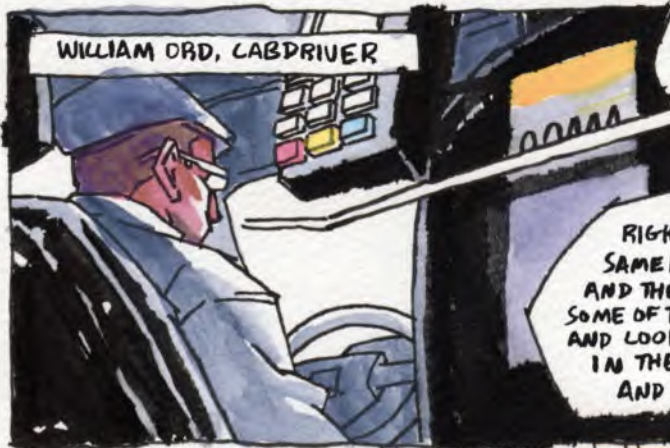
I'M A BROOKLYNITE WHO RECENTLY
RETURNED TO NEW ORLEANS TO VISIT FRIENDS.
IT WAS SUMMER, STORM SEASON...

TEN YEARS AFTER

I STAYED OUT IN THE BYWATER,
A NEIGHBORHOOD THAT HAD BEEN
PREDOMINANTLY BLACK BUT IS
CHANGING RAPIDLY.
IN THE YARD NEXT DOOR,
A FERAL CHICKEN HAS LAID HER EGGS
IN AN OVERTURNED WHEELBARROW.
THE BACKBOARD OF A FALLEN,
RUSTY BASKETBALL HOOP PROVIDES SHADE.



I CATCH A LOCAL CAB. AS WE DRIVE, I NOTICE WHAT LOOKS LIKE
NEW COFFEE SHOPS AND A VEGETARIAN RESTAURANT.
WHERE I'M FROM, THIS MEANS "GENTRIFICATION."
I ASK THE CABDRIVER ABOUT IT.



WILLIAM ORD, CABDRIVER

SEE WHERE I PICKED YOU UP?
AROUND TEN YEARS AGO, YOU PROBABLY
COULDA GOTTEN A TWO-BEDROOM HOUSE
FOR MAYBE \$550 A MONTH.
AFTER THE HURRICANE, THE GOVERNMENT
STEPPED IN WITH SUPPLEMENTAL RENT
AND PRICES WENT UP.

RIGHT NOW, YOU GET THAT
SAME HOUSE FOR \$1900 A MONTH
AND THEY AIN'T DOING NO CHANGES.
SOME OF THEM, YOU CAN STAND INSIDE
AND LOOK THROUGH A HOLE
IN THE FLOOR
AND SEE OUTSIDE.

OUT IN TREME, I MEET KATEY RED,
A LOCAL BOUNCE ARTIST.



I LOVE MY CITY.
I JUST HATE
THE STUFF THAT
GOES ON IN IT.

KATRINA
CAME AND PUSHED
PEOPLE OUT.
A LOT OF PEOPLE
MOVED RIGHT BACK
WHERE THEY
WERE...



... I GOT TWO
SISTERS THAT NEVER
CAME BACK.
THEY GET HOMESICK,
WANNA COME BACK
HOME, BUT WHEN
THEY GET BACK
HERE—THEY'D
RATHER NOT.
A LOT HAS CHANGED..
THE VIOLENCE...
THERE'S LOTS MORE
OF IT.

AS IF ON CUE, SWOLLEN CLOUDS AND THUNDER APPEAR AS I REACH THE OLD IRONWORKS, THE CONVERTED INDUSTRIAL SPACE WHERE *IN GOOD COMPANY* IS PREPARING TO STAGE "THE TEMPEST." THE PLAYERS SHARE THEIR POST-KATRINA ANECDOTES.

KATHLEEN MCMANUS IS ARIEL.

MY DADDY GREW UP ON DESIRE STREET. THERE'S AN EXPRESSION HERE—I'M SURE YOU'VE HEARD IT—"AIN'T DERE NO MORE."

KERRY CAHILL: CALIBAN.

I BOUGHT A HOUSE IN A NEIGHBORHOOD THAT'S RAPIDLY GENTRIFYING... AND I SAW THE LOOK OF RELIEF ON PEOPLE'S FACES WHEN I SAID, "I'VE BEEN HERE SINCE 2000."

GEORGE SANCHEZ: ALONSO.

I'M BORN AND RAISED HERE. ALL THESE PEOPLE CAME DOWN TO HELP... THANK GOD FOR THESE PEOPLE, AND AT THE SAME TIME, I HATE THEM BECAUSE THEY CHANGE THINGS...

FIVE MINUTES TO HOUSE!

IN THE HANDS OF THE PLAYERS, SHUTTERS AND FIXTURES FROM HOMES DEMOLISHED BY THE STORM AND THE FLOOD FORM A LIVING SHIP...

WHEN THE SEA IS, HENCE! WHAT CARES THESE ROARERS FOR THE NAME OF KING?

...AN ICONIC BLUE TARP AS ITS SAIL.

THE SHOW'S DIRECTOR, REBECCA FRANK, IS MOVING SOON...

YOU HEAR THAT DOG BARKING? I HEARD ABOUT AN INCIDENT, A THEATRE COMPANY MAKING A LOT OF NOISE—THE NEIGHBORS THREW ROCKS AND CALLED THE POLICE.

I'M LEAVING THIS NEIGHBORHOOD. THE LANDLORD SAYS HE CAN MAKE SIX GRAND A MONTH... HE SAYS HE'LL LET US FINISH OUT OUR LEASE. ...HOW KIND!

...DISPLACED BY AIRBNB.



Alice

McDermott

THESE

SHORT, DARK DAYS

February 3rd was a dark and dank day: cold spitting rain all morning and a low, steel-gray sky in the afternoon. At four, Jim persuaded his wife, Annie, to go out to do her shopping before full darkness fell. He closed the door behind her with a gentle wave. His hair was thinning, and he was missing a canine on the right side, but he was nevertheless a handsome man who, at thirty-two, might have passed for twenty. Heavy brows and deep-set, dark-lashed eyes that had been making women catch their breath since he was sixteen. Even if he'd grown bald and toothless, the eyes would have served him long into his old age.

His overcoat was on the hall tree beside the door. He lifted it and rolled it lengthwise against his thighs. Then he fitted it over the threshold, tucking the cloth of the sleeves and the hem as well as he could into the space beneath the door. Theirs was a railroad flat: kitchen in the back, then dining room, living room, and bedroom in the front. He needed only to push the heavy couch a few feet along the wall to block his wife's return. He stood on the seat to check that the glass transom above the door was closed. Then he stepped down. He straightened the lace on the back of the couch and brushed away the shallow impression his foot had made on the horsehair cushion.

In the kitchen, he pressed his cheek to the cold enamel of the stove and slid his hand into the tight space between it and the yellow wall until he found the rubber hose that connected the oven to the gas tap. He pulled at it as vigorously as he could, given the confined space. There was a satisfying pop, and a hiss that quickly faded. He straightened up with the hose in his hand. The kitchen window looked into the gray courtyard, where, on better days, there were lines of clothes baking in the sun, although the floor of the courtyard, even in the prettiest weather, was a junk yard and a jungle. There were rats and bedsprings and broken crates, a tangle of city-bred vegetation. Once, Annie, sitting on the windowsill with a clothespin in her mouth and a basket of wet linen at her feet, saw a man drag a small child through the muck and tie him to the pole that held the line. She watched the man take off his belt, and, with the first

crack of it against the child's bare calves, she began to yell. Leaning halfway out the window, she threatened to call the police, the fire department, the Gerrity Society. The man glanced up briefly, as if noticing a change in the weather, and then untied the sobbing child and dragged him away. "I know who you are," Annie cried. Although she didn't. When Jim ran into the kitchen at the sound of her shouting, she was out the window to her waist, with only one toe on the kitchen floor. He'd had to put his hands on her hips to ease her out of danger. Just one more of what had turned out to be too many days that he hadn't gone in to work or had arrived too late for his shift.

His trouble was with time. Bad luck for a trainman, even on the B.R.T. His trouble was that he liked to refuse time. He delighted in refusing it. He would come to the end of a long night, to the inevitability of 5 A.M., and, while other men, poor sheep, gave in every morning, turning from the pleasures of sleep or drink or talk or love to the duties of the day, he would continue as he willed. "I'm not going," he'd murmur. "I won't be constrained." Two weeks ago, he'd been discharged for unreliability and insubordination. The man Jim was inside—not the blushing, humiliated boy who'd stood ham-handed before the bosses—had shaken off the blow and turned away. But Annie had wept when he told her, and then said angrily, through her tears, that there was a baby coming, knowing even as she said it that to break the news to him in this way was to condemn the child to a life of trouble.

He took the tea towels she had left to dry by the sink, wound them into ropes, and placed them along the windowsill. He carried the length of rubber tubing through the living room and into the bedroom. He slipped off his shoes and put the tube to his mouth as if to pull smoke. He had seen this in a picture book somewhere: a fat sultan on a red pillow, doing much the same. He sat on the edge of the bed. He bowed his head and prayed: *now and at the hour of our death*. He lay back on the bed. He noticed that the room had grown dimmer still. *Hour of our. Our hour*. He remembered his mother, the picture book spread out on her wide lap. Within this very hour he would put his head on her

shoulder once again. Or would he? Would this effort to prove himself his own man—to prove that the hours of his life belonged to himself alone—bar him from Heaven? Did he believe in Heaven? There were moments when his faith fell out from under him like a trapdoor.

He stood up. Found his nightshirt beneath his pillow and twisted it, too. Then placed it along the edge of the bedroom window, again pushing the material into the narrow crevice where the frame met the sill, knowing all the while that the gesture was both ineffectual and unnecessary.

Down in the street, there was a good deal of movement. Dark coats and hats. A baby buggy or two, the wheels churning up a pale spray. When he turned back to the room, the light had failed in every corner, and he had to put out his hand to feel his way around the bed to his own side.

He stretched out. Playfully lifted the hose to one eye, as if to see along its length the black corridor of a subway tunnel, lit gold at the end by the station ahead. Then he closed his eyes and swallowed. Outside, a mother called to a child. There was the slow clapping of a horse-drawn cart. Something dropped to the floor in the apartment upstairs—a sewing basket, perhaps. There was a thud and then a scratchy chorus of wooden spools spinning. Or maybe it was coins, spilled from a fallen purse.

At six, the street lamps gave a polish to the wet windowpanes and the scattered black puddles in the street. Lamplight was reflected as well on the rump of a fire truck, and on the pale faces of a gathered crowd, with an extra sparkle on those who wore glasses—Sister St. Savior, for instance, a Little Sister of the Sick Poor, who had spent the afternoon collecting alms in the vestibule of the Woolworth's at Borough Hall. She was now on her way back to the convent, her bladder full, her ankles swollen, her round lenses turned toward the street light and the terrible scent of doused fire on the winter air.

The house where the fire had been looked startled: the windows of all four floors were wide open, shade cords and thin curtains flailing in the cold wind. Although the rest of the building was

dark, the vestibule at the top of the stone stoop was weirdly lit, crowded with policemen and firemen carrying lamps. Sister St. Savior wanted only to walk on, to get to her convent, her room, her toilet, but still she brushed through the crowd and climbed the steps. There was a limp fire hose running along the shadowy base of the bannister. Two of the officers in the hallway, turning to see her, tipped their hats and put out their hands as if she had been summoned. "Sister," one of them said. He was flushed and perspiring, and even in the dull light she could see that the cuffs of his jacket were singed. "Right in here."

The apartment was filled with people and the heavy drone of whispered conversation. There were two groups: one was gathered around a middle-aged man in shirtsleeves and carpet slippers who was sitting in a chair by the window, his face in his hands. The other, across the room, was tending to a woman stretched out on a dark couch, under a fringed lamp that was not lit. She had a cloth applied to her forehead, but she seemed to be speaking sensibly to the thin young man who leaned over her. When she saw the nun, the woman raised a limp hand and said, "She's in the bedroom, Sister." Her arm from wrist to elbow was glistening with a shiny salve—butter, perhaps.

"You might leave off with that grease," Sister said. "Unless you're determined to be basted." The young man turned at this. He wore a gray fedora and had a milk tooth in his grin. "Have the courtesy to doff your hat," she told him.

It was Sister St. Savior's vocation to enter the homes of strangers, mostly the sick and the elderly, to breeze into their apartments and sail comfortably through their rooms, to open their linen closets or their china cabinets or their bureau drawers, but the frequency with which she inserted herself into the homes of strangers had not diminished over the years her initial impulse to shade her eyes. She dipped her head as she passed through the parlor into a narrow corridor, but she saw enough to conclude that this was the home of a Jewish woman: the woman on the couch, she was certain; Jewish, she guessed, because of the fringed lampshade, the upright piano against the far wall, the dark oil paintings in the narrow hallway that

DISSOLUTION

sometimes I forget what country I'm in
I could write poems in bed
I think
have some Americans
look at your awful movie
to tell you when
you're wrong
& just racist. I got this bug bite
that could be anything.
Got no new information
to send across. I'm willing
to embrace new sorta cray-
ony tone
scribbled version
of empty so it's kind
of full. A kid could draw this world
it
had been lived in
so long.

You forgot
to call your family
& now you're ready to write an
explicit
bible of love.

The ripple

seemed to depict two ordinary peasants, not saints. A place unprepared for visitors, arrested, as things so often were, by crisis and tragedy, in the midst of what should have been a private hour. She saw, as she passed by, that there was a plate on the small table in the kitchen, that it contained half a piece of bread, bitten and stained with a dark gravy. A glass of tea on the edge of a folded newspaper.

In the candlelit bedroom, two more policemen were conferring in a corner. There were dark stockings hung over the back of a chair, a gray corset on the threadbare carpet at the foot of the bed. There was a girl on the bed, her face to the wall, her dark skirt spread out around her, as if she had fallen there from some height. Another woman leaned over her, a hand on the girl's shoulder.

The policemen nodded at the nun, and the shorter one took off his cap as he moved toward her. He, too, was singed about the cuffs. He had a heavy face and bad dentures, but there was compassion

in the way he gestured with his short arms, toward the girl on the bed, toward the ceiling and the upstairs apartment, where the fire had been, a compassion that seemed to weigh down his limbs. Soft-hearted, Sister thought, one of us. The girl, he said, had come in from her shopping and found the door to her place blocked from the inside. She went to her neighbors, the man next door and the woman who lived here. They helped her push the door open and then the man lit a match to hold against the darkness. There was an explosion. Luckily, he, the policeman, was just at the corner and was able to put the fire out, while neighbors carried the three of them down here. Inside the apartment, in the bedroom, he had found a young man on the bed, dead. Asphyxiated. The girl's husband.

Sister St. Savior drew in her breath, blessed herself. "He fell asleep, poor man," she said gently. "The pilot light must have gone out."

The officer glanced over his shoulder,

of experience is the
only beauty here.

My coloring book
why not is so
like a movie. And I just hand you this damp
coloring book
I say there. That's my model.
Not the kind of laminate
shit you can bring
in the tub. I'm not making some
picture book of bourgeois
life. A damp
coloring book
is naturally
orange. You left
it outside *now* you want to save
it? It's still good
and that's your secret.

How did a mosquito
get under these sheets. Knocking
against my calf. They
stop when I stop
thinking about them. The book
that was my very
private thing
is gone.

—Eileen Myles

toward the bed, and then took the Sister's elbow and walked her out to the narrow hall. Now they stood in the kitchen doorway. "He killed himself," the officer whispered, his breath sour, as if in reaction to the situation he was obliged to report. "Turned on the gas. Lucky he didn't take everyone else with him."

Sister accepted the information with only a discreet nod. When she looked up again—her eyes behind her glasses were small and brown and caught the light the way only a hard surface would, marble or black tin, nothing watery—the truth of the suicide was both acknowledged and put away. She had entered the homes of strangers and seen the bottles in the bin, the poor contents of a cupboard, the bruise in a hidden place, seen as well, once, a pale, thumb-size infant in a basin filled with blood and had bowed her head and nodded in just the same way.

"What's the girl's name?" she asked.

The officer frowned. "Mc-Something. Annie they called her. Irish extraction,"

he added. "That's why I thought to call for you."

Sister smiled. "Is that so?" she said. They both knew he was lying. No one had called for her. She had been on her way home, merely passing by. She dipped her head again, forgiving him his vanity—hadn't he said, too, that he'd put out the fire himself? "I'll go to her, then," she said.

As she stepped away, she saw the milk-toothed young man, still in his hat, approach the officer. "Hey, O'Neil!" he shouted. No courtesy in him.

Inside the shadowed bedroom, the neighbor woman who stood at the bedside had her eyes elsewhere, on the gloaming at the far side of the cluttered room. No doubt there were children waiting for their dinner, a husband to be placated. A woman with a family of her own, with troubles of her own, could not be expected to attend to the sorrows of another indefinitely. The nun motioned to her: they would exchange places.

When the woman was gone, Sister reached inside her cloak and took the small basket from under her arm. It was a flimsy thing, woven of unblessed palms, and much the worse for being crushed against her body for so long. She straightened and reshaped it a bit, catching as she did the green scent that the warmth of her flesh and the work of her hands could sometimes coax from the dried reeds. She placed it on the table beside the bed and untied the money pouch from her belt. It was all coins today, mostly pennies. She placed the pouch in the basket and then sat carefully on the side of the bed, her kidneys aching, her feet throbbing inside her shoes. She was sixty-four that year, and the stiffness in her back and her knees and the arthritis in her hands on these damp days had begun to limit her usefulness. More and more she was sent out with her basket to beg, rather than to nurse. She kept her dissatisfaction with the arrangement to herself, which meant that she complained only to God, who knew how she felt. Who had sent her here.

She looked at the girl's dark form, the length of her back and the curve of her young hip. Suddenly, the girl turned in the bed and threw herself into the Sister's lap, weeping. Sister St. Savior put her hand to the girl's dark hair. It was thick, and as soft as silk. She lifted the heavy knot of it and then brushed a strand from her cheek.

This much the nun was certain of: the girl's husband had cherished his wife with the beautiful hair. Love was not the problem. Money, more likely. Alcohol. Madness. The day and time itself: late afternoon in early February, was there a moment of the year better suited for despair? God Himself was helpless against it—Sister St. Savior believed this. She believed that God had held His head in His hands while the young man in the apartment above was slipping off this gray life—collar and yoke. God had wept, she believed this, even as she was getting off her chair in the lobby of Woolworth's an hour before her usual time, even as she was climbing the stone steps, footsore and weary and needing a toilet, but going up anyway, although no one had sent for her.

"What we must do," she said at last, "is put one foot in front of the other." It

was her usual introductory phrase. "Have you had your dinner?" she said. The girl shook her head against the nun's thigh. "Are there relations we can call for you?" Again she shook her head. "No one," she whispered. "Just Jim and me." Sister had the impulse to lift the girl's shoulders a bit, to take the pressure of her weight off her own aching bladder, but resisted. She could endure it a little longer. "You'll need a place to stay," she said. "For tonight, anyway."

Now the girl pulled away and raised her face to the dim light. She was neither as young nor as pretty as Sister had imagined. It was a plain, round face, swollen with tears. "Where will I bury him?" she asked. In her eyes, the nun saw the determination—not a result of the Sister's admonition but, rather, what the woman herself was made of—to put one foot in front of the other. "We've got a plot in Calvary," the girl said. "We got it when we were married. But the Church will never allow it now."

"Have you got the deed?" she asked, and the girl nodded.

"Where?"

"Upstairs," she said. "In the side-board."

Once, early in her novitiate, the nun had been sent to a squalid apartment filled with wretched children, where a skeletal woman, made old, discolored, barely human, by pain, was in the last throes of her disease. "There's nothing to be done," Sister Miriam had advised before they opened the door. And then, as they entered—there was the tremendous animal odor of decay, the woman's hoarse moans, the famished children's fraught silence—she added, "Do what you can."

"Your man fell asleep," Sister St. Savior whispered now. "The flame went out. It was a wet and unfortunate day." She paused to make sure the girl had heard. "He belongs in Calvary," she said. "You paid for the plot, didn't you?" The girl nodded slowly. "Well, that's where he'll go."

In her forty-seven years of living in this city, Sister had collected any number of acquaintances who could help surmount the many rules and regulations—Church rules and city rules and what Sister Miriam called the rules of polite society—that complicated the lives of women: Catholic women in par-

ticular, and poor women in general. Her own little Tammany, Sister Miriam called it. If it was all done quickly enough, Sister St. Savior knew she could get this woman's husband buried in Calvary.

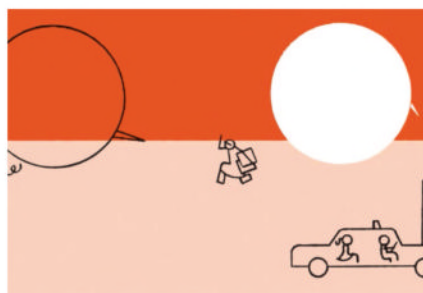
"How long were you and Jim married?" the nun asked. She understood that there was some small resurrection in just speaking the man's name.

"Two years," the girl said to the ceiling. And then she brushed her fingertips over her belly. "I've got a baby coming in summer."

Sister nodded. All right. God had His head out of His hands now, at least. He knew the future. There would be a baby to care for in the summer. And, for once, she would not foist the diapering and the spitting up onto one of the younger nuns. She nearly smiled. Out of the depths—the phrase came to her like a fresh scent on the air—comes the promise of a baby. A green scent coaxed out of dried reeds.

The girl raised one hand from her stomach and clutched the crown of her hair. "He lost his job," she said. "They let him go. The B.R.T. He was at odd ends."

The nun lifted Annie's hand from her hair—it was a mad, dramatic gesture that would lead to mad, dramatic speech—and placed it once again on her middle, where her thoughts should be. "It might be best," Sister said, "if you



don't move tonight. I'll speak to the lady of the house. We'll get something arranged."

In the parlor, they all turned to Sister St. Savior as if she had indeed been summoned to direct the proceedings. It was agreed that the lady of the house—Gertler was her name—would spend the night with her sister-in-law, across the street. Since the gas had been turned off, and would not be turned on again until tomorrow, most of the build-

ing's occupants were clearing out for the evening. In the vestibule, neighbors were coming down the dark staircase with bedding and small satchels. Sister sent word with one of them to the owner of a boarding house nearby: the middle-aged neighbor would go there. The thin young man in the hat had already left, so she asked Officer O'Neil to knock on the door of one Dr. Hannigan. "Mention my name," she said. "He'll roll his eyes, but he'll come."

It wasn't until they'd all cleared out, and well before Dr. Hannigan arrived, that Sister allowed herself to use the toilet. Then she helped Annie undress and get comfortable in Mrs. Gertler's bed. When Dr. Hannigan came, she held a candle over his shoulder while he examined the girl, put a stethoscope to her belly and her rising chest. As he was leaving, she asked him to go by the convent to tell them where she was—"So they don't think I've been murdered." And to, please, as well, go by the morgue to tell them that Sheen and Sons Funeral Home would be making the arrangements. She bent her head back to see him better, to make sure that her small black eyes were right on his own. There were some details, she added, that she'd ask him to keep to himself.

Later, two of the sisters from the convent arrived with more blankets and two hot-water bottles wrapped in rags, and a dinner of biscuits and cheese and hot tea, which Sister St. Savior ate in the chair she had pulled up to the side of the bed. Then she dozed with her rosary in her gloved hands and dreamed, because of the cold, no doubt, and the familiar, icy ache of it in her toes, that she was on her stool in the vestibule of Woolworth's. She startled awake twice because, in her dream, the woven basket, full of coins, was sliding off her lap.

When the darkness had lifted a bit, she stood and walked into the parlor. The two sisters who had brought the supplies, Sister Lucy and a young novice whose name she couldn't recall, were still there, side by side on the couch, asleep, puffed into their black cloaks like gulls on a pier.

Slowly, Sister climbed first one flight, then the second, until she found the apartment that had burned. In the

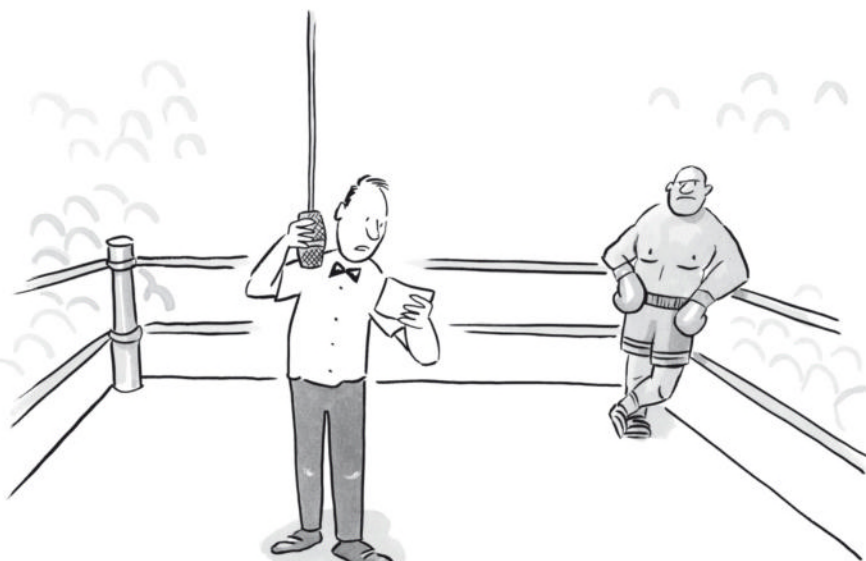
growing light, it was difficult to say what had ignited in the blast, though the smell of smoke and burned wool was strong. And then she saw on the floor a man's overcoat and the sodden cushions of a high-backed couch, and the black traces of a large burn across the waterlogged rug. In the kitchen, there were the charred remains of a pair of muslin curtains and an arc of soot along the oven wall. She ran her finger through it, only to confirm that it would be easily removed. What would be difficult to remove, she knew, was the terrible odor. The smell of wet cinders, doused peat, damp stone, and swollen wood. Fire, shipwreck, the turned earth of graveyards.

She went to the single window in the narrow kitchen. The courtyard below was full of shadow; looking down into it disheartened her in a way that she was unprepared for. She sat on the sill, lifted the twisted tea towel that had been left there. Outside, most of the facing windows were still dark, only a small light here and there: an early worker, a mother with an infant, a bedside vigil. Reluctantly, she cast her eyes down into the courtyard again. The sun would have to be well up in the sky to light that gloomy tangle, but, even at this hour, there was a variation in the shadows that caught her attention. It was the movement of birds, or of a stalking cat, or a patch of puddled rainwater briefly reflecting the coming dawn, but for just a moment she thought it was a man, crawling—"cowering" was the word—beneath the snarl of junk and dead leaves, the vague early light just catching the perspiration on his wide brow, the gleam of a tooth or an eye.

She shivered, flexed her stiff fingers. She smoothed the towel on her lap and folded it neatly.

She could tell herself that the illusion was purposeful: God showing her an image of the young man, the suicide, trapped in his bitter purgatory. But she refused the notion. It was superstition. It was the Devil himself who had drawn her eyes down, who had brushed her heart with despair. That was the truth of it.

In the dining room, the sideboard was as big as a boat. She found the couple's lease and marriage license before she put her hand on the narrow



Keith Jones

"He's a heavyweight, but he'd prefer to leave it at that."

blue folder on which someone had written—it was a man's severe script—"Deed for Calvary." She slipped it into her pocket.

In the bedroom, the windows were wide open, the shades rolled up; an ashen cord pull moved slowly in the dawn breeze. The bed was made, the blankets smoothed, no trace of fire in here, although there was more soot along the far wall. No trace, either, of where the husband might have lain on the bed. She knew immediately—it was the sympathy in his gestures, toward the girl on the bed, toward the apartment above—that it was the short police officer who had come back, after the body had been removed, to smooth and straighten the counterpane. One of us.

Sister lifted the two pillows, slipped off their cases, then pulled off the sheets and the blankets, and said to God, "As You made us," at the familiar sight of the rusty stains on the blue ticking of the mattress. She pushed the sheets into one of the pillowcases and wrapped a blanket around them. As she stepped away with the linens in her arms, she kicked something, and looked over her shoulder to see what it was. A man's shoe, broad brown leather, well worn. There were two of them at the end of the bed. Gaping and forlorn, the

black laces wildly trailing. She nudged them with her toe until they were safely hidden.

She carried the pile of bedding down the narrow stairs. Sister Lucy was still sunk into herself, breathing deeply. Sister St. Savior dropped the linens on the couch beside her and, when that didn't get her to stir, she touched the Sister's black shoe with her own—and felt the keenness of the repeated motion, the man's empty shoe upstairs and Sister Lucy's here, still filled with its owner's mortal foot. "I'd like you to sit with the lady," she said.

In the bedroom, the young nun—Sister Jeanne was her name—had her rosary in her hand and her eyes on the pile of blankets and coats under which the girl slept. Sister St. Savior signalled to her from the door, and she and Sister Lucy changed places. In the parlor, Sister St. Savior told Sister Jeanne that she was to take the bedclothes to the convent for washing and return with a bucket and broom. The two of them were going to scrub the apartment upstairs, roll up the wet rug, dry the floors, and repair what they could, to soften the blow of the woman's return to the place where the accident had occurred, because return she would, with nowhere else to go and a baby on the way.

Sister Jeanne's eyes grew moist at this

news. The tears suited her face, which was dewy with youth. Obediently, the young nun gathered the linens from the couch. Sister St. Savior went with her to the vestibule and then watched her walk delicately down the stone stairs, the bundle held to one side so that she could see her tiny feet as she descended. Sister Jeanne was small and slight, but there was a firmness about her, a buoyancy, perhaps, as she hurried away, the bundle in her arms, so much to do. She was of an age, Sister St. Savior understood, when tragedy was no less thrilling than romance.

Sister St. Savior then headed down the steps herself. Sheen's funeral parlor was only eight blocks over.

By the time Sister Jeanne returned, the snow had become steady and the sidewalk was slick with it. She carried a broom and a bucket that contained both a scrub brush and breakfast: a jar of tea, bread, butter, and jam, all wrapped in a towel. As she reached the building, Sister Lucy was just coming down the steps, pulling her cloak around her hips and turning down the corners of her mouth as if the two motions were somehow connected—some

necessary accommodation to what Sister Jeanne saw immediately was her ferocious anger.

"St. Savior's got the body coming back tonight," Sister Lucy said, and added for emphasis, "This evening. For the wake. And buried first thing tomorrow morning." She shook her jowls. She was a mannish, ugly woman, humorless, severe, but an excellent nurse. "Tomorrow!" Sister Lucy said again. "Calvary. She's got it all arranged. And why is she rushing him into the ground?" She shivered a bit, then declared, "You can't pull strings with God. You can't pull the wool over God's eyes."

A policeman and a fireman were conferring with another man in the hallway by the stairs. They all turned and nodded to Sister Jeanne as she came through the vestibule. The door to the parlor apartment was ajar, and she let herself in. She crossed the living room and entered the narrow corridor with its two portraits of dour peasants, and found Sister St. Savior in the tiny kitchen. Sister Jeanne placed the broom against the door and carried the bucket to the table where the old nun sat. The kitchen had been scrubbed; the only trace of Mrs. Gertler's dinner was the newspaper that

had been folded beside her plate. Sister St. Savior now had it wide open before her.

Sister Jeanne poured the milky tea into a cup and set it on the table. "It's still awfully cold in here, Sister," she said.

Sister St. Savior moved the cup closer without raising it. "The men have just been in to turn on the gas," she said. "I asked them to carry out a few things that were damaged in the fire. They're going to wash down the walls for me as well. So we've made some progress."

Sister Jeanne took a plate from the cupboard, set out the bread and the jam.

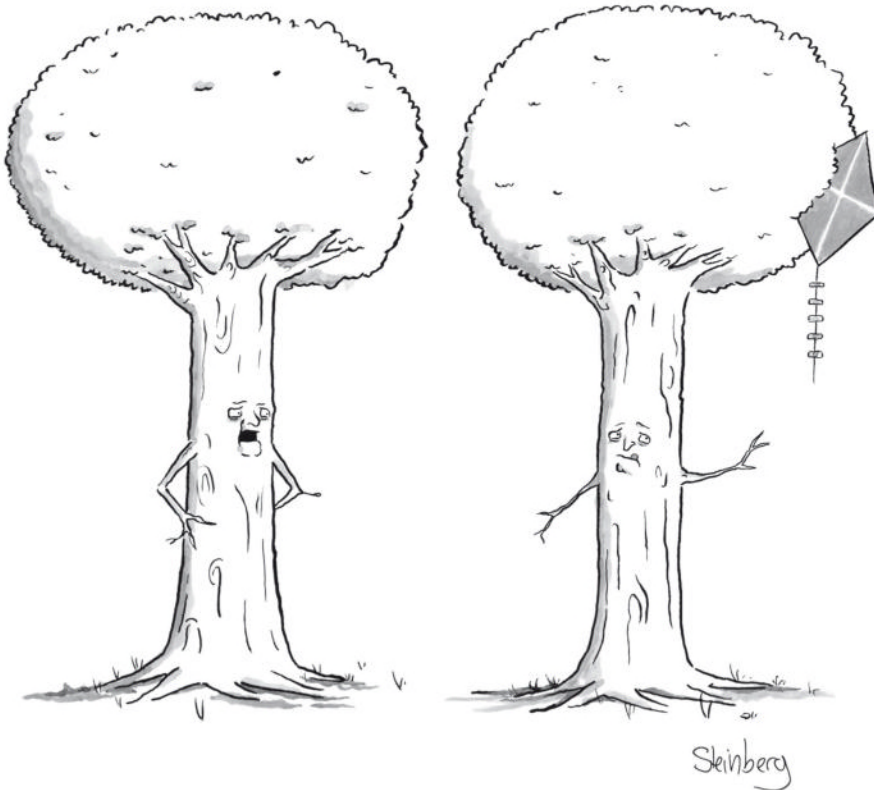
"Mr. Sheen will get the body from the morgue this morning," Sister St. Savior went on. "First thing when the lady wakes she'll have to pick out his clothes. You can run them over for me. We've got a Mass set for six tomorrow morning. Then the cemetery. The ground, praise God, isn't frozen. It'll all be finished before the new day's begun."

"That's quick," Sister Jeanne said. She hesitated and then added, "Sister Lucy wonders why it's such a rush."

Sister St. Savior only raised her eyes to the top of the newspaper. "Sister Lucy," she said casually, "has a big mouth."

She turned the opened newspaper over, to the front page, straightening the edges. "Here's a story," she said and put her fingertip to the page. "Mr. Sheen mentioned it to me this morning. A man over in Jersey, playing billiards in his home, accidentally opened the gas tap in the room, with the pole they use, the cue, it says, and asphyxiated himself." She raised her chin. "His poor wife called him for dinner and found him gone. Day before yesterday. Mr. Sheen mentioned it to me this morning. He was pointing out how common these things are. These accidents with the gas."

Sister St. Savior moved her finger up the page. "And now here's a story of a suicide," she continued. "On the same page. Over on Wards Island. A man being treated at the hospital over there, for madness. It seems he was doing well enough, but then he threw himself into the water and disappeared. At Hell's Gate. It says the water covered him up at Hell's Gate." She clucked her tongue. "As if the Devil needed to put a fine point on his work." She moved her arm



"No, still there."

once again. She might have been signing a blessing over the page. "And here's another story, about a Wall Street man gone insane. Same day. Throwing bottles into the street, bellowing. Carted off to the hospital." She leaned forward, squinting toward her finger on the page. "Where he demanded to see J. P. Morgan and Colonel Roosevelt."

Sister Jeanne cocked her head a bit, as if to read the page herself. "Is it true?" she asked.

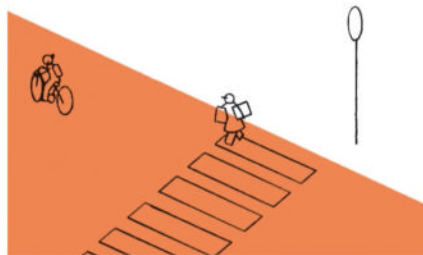
Sister St. Savior laughed. "True enough." Her smile was as smooth as paint. "The Devil loves these short, dark days." She went on, "Mr. Sheen said, as a matter of fact, that he could show the article about the billiard man to anyone in the Church, or at the cemetery, in case there was a question. To show how common these sorts of accidents were. And how easily they could be misinterpreted. This New Jersey man, after all, had come home early from work. And closed the door. Had he been a poor man, not a man with a billiard table at all, they might have made a different report out of it. The rich can get whatever they want put into the papers."

An hour later, when Mrs. Gertler returned to reclaim her apartment, Annie was up and dressed and sitting in a chair by the window with one of Sister Jeanne's handkerchiefs clutched in both hands. The two nuns walked up the stairs with her, Sister Jeanne ahead and Sister St. Savior just behind.

At four o'clock, the black hearse arrived and the coffin was carried up the stairs by Mr. Sheen and his assistants. The husband's face was pale and waxen but it was, nevertheless, a lovely face. Boyish and solemn above the starched white collar, with a kind of youthful stubbornness about it as well. The look of a child, Sister St. Savior thought, confronting a spoon of castor oil.

While Annie and Sister Jeanne knelt, Sister St. Savior blessed herself and considered the sin of her deception, slipping a suicide into hallowed ground. A man who had rejected his life, the love of this brokenhearted girl, the child coming to them in the summer. She said to God, who knew her thoughts, "Hold it against me if You will." He could put this day on the side of the ledger where all her sins were listed: the hatred she

felt for certain politicians, the money she sometimes stole from her own basket to give out as she pleased—to a girl with a raging case of the clap, to the bruised wife of a drunk, to the mother of the thumb-size infant, which she had wrapped in a clean handkerchief, baptized, and then buried in the convent garden. All the moments of how many days when her compassion failed, her patience failed, when her love for God's people could not outrun the girlish alac-



rity of her scorn for their stupidity, their petty sins.

She wanted the man buried in Calvary to give comfort to his poor wife, true. To get the girl what she'd paid for. But she also wanted to prove herself something more than a beggar, here at the end of her usefulness. She would get him buried in Calvary if only because the Church wanted him out, and she, who had spent her life in service to the Church, wanted him in. "Hold it against the good I've done," she prayed. "We'll sort it out when I see You."

Only a few neighbors came to call, every one of them a little restrained in sympathy, given the unspoken understanding that the son of a bitch could have taken them all with him. A trio of red-faced motormen from the B.R.T. stopped by, but they stayed only a minute, when no drink was offered.

Later, the two nuns walked Mr. Sheen downstairs, in order to give the girl some time alone with her husband. On the street, he reached into the cab of the hearse and pulled out the day's newspaper. He folded back a page and tapped a narrow article. Sister St. Savior leaned forward to read, Sister Jeanne at her elbow. In the descending light of the cold evening, the two could just make out the headline: "SUICIDE ENDANGERS OTHERS." It was followed by a full report of the fire and the man's death by his own hand. "There's nothing to be

done, Sister," Mr. Sheen whispered. "Now that it's in the paper, there's not a Catholic cemetery that will have him."

Sister St. Savior pushed the undertaker's hand away. She thought of the young man with the milk tooth and the gray fedora. "The *New York Times*," she said, "has a big mouth."

The two nuns climbed the stairs again. Inside, they coaxed the sobbing girl up off her knees and into the bed. It was Sister Jeanne who took over then—no weariness in her narrow shoulders, no indication at all that she felt the tedium of too much sympathy for a stranger. With Annie settled, she told Sister St. Savior to go back to the convent to rest. She said she would keep vigil through the long night and have the lady ready first thing in the morning.

Sister St. Savior left the two of them in the bedroom. At the casket, she paused again to look at the young man's face. The stubbornness had drained away; it was only lifeless now. She went into the kitchen and glanced down into the purgatory of the back yard. At this hour, all movement was in the lighted windows above: a man at a table, a child with a bedside lamp, a young woman walking an infant to and fro.

Of course, it was Sister Jeanne who would be here when the baby arrived, Sister Jeanne who had been sent for.

She felt a beggar's envy. She envied the young nun, true enough—a new sin for her side of the ledger. But she envied as well the coming dawn, still so many hours away. She envied the very day, when those who have despaired lie trapped in the featureless dark, while the young, the believing, bustle on, one foot in front of the other, so much to do.

The baby, a daughter, was born in August. She was called Sally, but christened St. Savior in honor of the Sister's kindness that sad afternoon. The damp and gray afternoon when the pilot went out. When her young father, a motorman for the B.R.T. whose grave she never found, sent her mother to do the shopping while he had himself a little nap. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

McDermott on "These Short, Dark Days."



Didion in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, in April, 1967, reporting the story that became "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." "That piece



is a blank for me," she said later.

ABOVE: FRANÇOIS AVRIL; LEFT: TED STRESHINSKY/CORBIS

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

OUT OF BETHLEHEM

The radicalization of Joan Didion.

BY LOUIS MENAND

In the late spring of 1967, Joan Didion, accompanied by a photojournalist named Ted Streshinsky, began making trips from Berkeley, where she was staying, to Haight-Ashbury, to do research for a piece on the hippies for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Didion was thirty-two, and she had been a magazine writer for eleven years. She and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, had moved from New York City to Southern California three years earlier, and, in March, 1966, they had adopted a daughter and named her Quintana Roo, after an area on the Yucatán Peninsula.

In the summer of 1967, the Haight was a magnet for people looking for a place to do drugs. Didion hung out mainly with runaways and acidheads. She met people like Deadeye, a dealer, and his old lady, Gerry, who wrote poetry but gave it up after her guitar was stolen. Deadeye tells Didion he is looking for a ride to New York City. She shows him a sign offering a ride to Chicago. He asks her where Chicago is.

She meets Jeff and his fifteen-year-old girlfriend, Debbie, who has run away from home. Didion asks them about their plans. "We're just gonna let it all happen," Jeff says. She meets Steve, who says, "I found love on acid. But I lost it. Now I'm finding it again. With nothing but grass." She meets Vicki, who dropped out of Laguna High, "because I had mono," and followed the Grateful Dead to San Francisco. She meets a Hare Krishna named Michael, whose brother-in-law explains that "if every-

body chanted there wouldn't be any problem with the police or anybody," and a five-year-old named Susan, who takes LSD and informs Didion that she is in High Kindergarten.

Didion got plenty of material, but she had no idea how to make a story out of it. Under deadline pressure, she decided to create a verbal montage of scenes from the Haight. She chose a phrase from Yeats's "The Second Coming" for the title, and, in September, "The Hippie Generation: Slouching Towards Bethlehem," with photographs by Streshinsky, was a cover story in *The Saturday Evening Post*. An editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Henry Robbins, encouraged Didion to turn the piece into a book. Nine months later, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" appeared as the title essay in her first collection of nonfiction. It is the phrase everyone knows Joan Didion by.

"Slouching Towards Bethlehem" is a classic of what was later named the New Journalism. Didion used a vernacular voice that mimicked the laid-back aimlessness of Haight speech. More New Journalistically, she adopted a Haight personality. She blended into the scene; she internalized its confusions. She gave readers the sense that she was putting herself at risk by reporting this story, that she might get sucked into the Haight abyss and become a lost soul, too:

We drink some more green tea and talk about going up to Malakoff Diggings in Nevada County because some people are starting a commune there and Max thinks it would

be a groove to take acid in the diggings. He said maybe we could go next week, or the week after, or anyway sometime before his case comes up. Almost everyone I meet in San Francisco has to go to court at some point in the middle future. I never ask why.

"Slouching Towards Bethlehem" is not a very good piece of standard journalism, though. Didion did no real interviewing or reporting. The hippies she tried to have conversations with said "Groovy" a lot and recycled flower-power clichés. The cops refused to talk to her. So did the Diggers, who ran a sort of hippie welfare agency in the Haight. The Diggers accused Didion of "media poisoning," by which they meant coverage in the mainstream press designed to demonize the counterculture.

The Diggers were not wrong. The mainstream press (such as the places Didion wrote for, places like *The Saturday Evening Post*) was conflicted about the hippie phenomenon. It had journalistic sex appeal. Hippies were photogenic, free love and the psychedelic style made good copy, and the music was uncontroversially great. Around the time Didion was in San Francisco, the Beatles released "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," and soon afterward the Monterey Pop Festival was held. D.A. Pennebaker's film of the concert came out in 1968 and introduced many people to Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Ravi Shankar. Everybody loved Ravi Shankar.

Ravi Shankar did not use drugs, however. The drugs were the sketchy part of the story, LSD especially. People thought that LSD made teen-age girls jump off bridges. By the time Didion's article came out, *Time* had run several stories about "the dangerous LSD craze." And a lot of Didion's piece is about LSD, people on acid saying "Wow" while their toddlers set fire to the living room. The cover of the *Post* was a photograph of a slightly sinister man, looking like a dealer, in a top hat and face paint—an evil Pied Piper. That photograph was what the Diggers meant by "media poisoning."

There was nothing unusual about finding, at the core of a life-style trend of which the use of controlled substances is an integral feature, a group of full-time dropouts. Seven years earlier, the sociologist Ned Polsky had gone to Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side to study the Beats. He found the

same mixture Didion found in San Francisco: runaways and people who, when he interviewed them, rehearsed the Beat mantras. Having a job is selling out; politics are a drag; and so on. What they all had in common, Polsky concluded, was drugs. Only a small proportion were addicts, but a Beat's day was basically about buying and taking drugs.

And there weren't that many of them. Most of the people who walked around the Village looking like Beats in 1960, like most of the people who walked around San Francisco or Berkeley or Cambridge looking like hippies in 1967, were weekend dropouts. They were contingent rebels. They put on the costumes; they went to the concerts and got high; and then they went back to school or back to work. It was a life style, not a life.

Even if you factored in the contingent leisure force, the hippie counterculture was small. The sensationalized press coverage of the period has left a permanent image of the late nineteen-sixties as a time when everyone was tripping or stoned. In 1967, when Didion's article came out, only one per cent of college students reported having tried LSD. In 1969, only four per cent of adults said they had smoked marijuana. Recreational drug use soared in the nineteen-seventies, but the press was no longer interested. The whole thing had stopped being sexy.

Didion presented her article as an investigation into what she called "social hemorrhaging." She suggested that what was going on in Haight-Ashbury was the symptom of some sort of national unravelling. But she knew that, at the level of "getting the story," her piece was a failure. She could see, with the X-ray clarity she appears to have been born with, what was happening on the street; she could make her readers see it; but she couldn't explain it.

In the preface to the book, she noted that no one had understood the article. "I had never gotten a feedback so universally beside the point," she wrote. A few years later, in a radio interview on KPFR, she blamed herself. "Usually on a piece there comes a day when you know you never have to do another interview," she said. "You can go home, you've gotten it. Well, that day never came on that piece. . . . That piece is a blank for me still."

People liked the collection "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" (though it was not, at first, a big seller). People were intrigued by "Play It as It Lays," Didion's second novel, which came out two years later (though it got some hostile reviews). Mainly, though, everyone was fascinated by the authorial persona, the hypersensitive neurasthenic who drove a Corvette Sting Ray, the frail gamine with the migraine headaches and the dark glasses and the searchlight mind, the writer who seemed to know in her bones what readers were afraid to face, which is that the center no longer holds, the falcon cannot hear the falconer, the story line is broken.

Didion created the part—she was a master of the author photo—and she could have played it right up to the final curtain. But, after "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" and "Play It as It Lays," she completely reassessed not only her practice as a journalist but her understanding of American life, her politics, and even the basis of her moral judgments. She decided she wanted to get what she had failed to get with the hippies. She wanted to get the story.

Tracy Daugherty's "The Last Love Song" (St. Martin's) is a biography of Joan Didion written partly in the style of Joan Didion, a style of ellipses, fragments, and refrains. This is not what you ideally want in a biography. The point of a biography is to reveal what's behind the ellipses. Daugherty operated under difficulties, though. He was unable to persuade Didion to cooperate, and it's obvious that many people close to Didion refused to talk to him as well.

That doesn't mean that he wasn't thorough. He had access to Didion's papers, housed at Berkeley, and a large amount of information was already out there. For someone with a reputation for being guarded and tongue-tied, Didion did a lot of promotion. She went on book tours and submitted to profiles. She did radio; she did television; she talked to *Publishers Weekly*. It added up.

She also wrote obsessively about herself—not only in her memoirs, "The Year of Magical Thinking," about the death of her husband, and "Blue Nights," about the death of her daughter, but in reported pieces and in personal essays, which she started producing almost as soon as she started publishing. (She



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eventually got bored with the genre and gave it up. “I didn’t want to become Miss Lonelyhearts,” she said.) She once delivered a lecture called “Why I Write.” She began by pointing out that the sound you hear in those three words is “I, I, I.”

Much of “The Last Love Song” is therefore an intelligent and elegant paraphrase of things Didion has already said or written. There is some sniping from the odd acquaintance or estranged friend, but revelations weren’t in the cards. The “real” Didion Daugherty shows us is just the obverse of the image: ambitious (hence the anxiety), controlling (hence the brittleness), and chic (hence the Corvette).

You could work up a dichotomy here, but it doesn’t get you very far. Didion and Dunne made an excellent living as Hollywood screenwriters and script doctors. They lived in Malibu and then in Brentwood Park, O.J.’s old nabe, and were part of the Hollywood talent élite. Dunne’s brother Dominick was a producer for movies and television; their nephew was Griffin Dunne, the actor. And Didion knows something about fashion and style—she began her career at *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue*. But there’s no reason that any of this should be incompatible with one day writing about death squads in El Salvador.

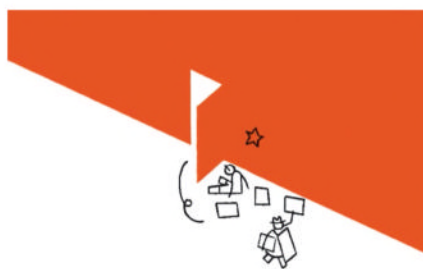
John Dunne was a gregarious man, a social drinker and a raconteur, and he and Didion worked up a sort of Penn and Teller routine. One sang, the other mostly didn’t. They rarely gave separate audiences. If you asked to speak to one, you almost invariably spoke to both, even on the telephone. “I was at first surprised that John Dunne sat through most of the interview and did nearly all the talking,” Susan Braudy wrote after interviewing Didion for *Ms.*, in 1977. Didion’s explanation is that she isn’t a talker; she’s a writer. “I’m only myself in front of my typewriter,” she finally told Braudy. There is no reason to doubt this. The person we’re interested in is the person on the page.

It’s a common mistake, in assessing Didion’s work, to interpret her sensibility as a reflection of the times—to imagine, as Daugherty puts it, that she has “always spoken for us.” That’s certainly not the way she has presented herself. In a column she started writing for *Life* in 1969, she introduced herself as “a woman who for some time now has felt

radically separated from most of the ideas that seem to interest other people.” She’s not like us. She’s weird. That’s why we want to read her.

Didion came from a family of Republicans. She was born in Sacramento in 1934, a fifth-generation Californian. Her father started out in insurance, speculated in real estate, and ended up spending most of his career in the military, a very California trifecta. Turned down by Stanford, Didion attended Berkeley, in an era when campus life was socially conventional and politically dormant. In 1955, she won a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle* and spent a few months in New York City. A year later, she won a similar contest at *Vogue*, and she moved to New York in the fall of 1956 and began her magazine career there. Leaving home, she later said, “just seems part of your duty in life.”

Didion worked at *Vogue* for ten years. She continued to write for *Mademoiselle*, and, in 1960, she began contributing to *The National Review*, William F. Buckley’s conservative weekly. She wrote pieces about John Wayne, her favorite movie star, and, in the 1964 Presidential election, she voted for Barry Goldwater. She adored Goldwater. It was hardly a surprise that she found Haight-Ashbury repugnant. Her editors at the *Post* understood perfectly how she would react. They designed



the cover before she handed in the piece.

Didion’s transformation as a writer did not involve a conversion to the counterculture or to the New Left. She genuinely loathed the hippies, whom she associated with characters like Charles Manson, and she thought that the Black Panthers and the student radicals were both frightening and ridiculous. She found Jim Morrison kind of ridiculous, too. Polsky, in his study of the Beats, had dismissed the theory, endorsed by some

social critics in the nineteen-fifties, that disaffected dropouts are potential recruits for authoritarian political movements. Didion never rejected that theory. She thinks that dropouts are symptoms of a dangerous social pathology.

What changed was her understanding of where dropouts come from, of why people turn into runaways and acid-heads and members of the Symbionese Liberation Army, why parents abandon their children on highway dividers, why Harlem teen-agers go rampaging through Central Park at night, why middle-class boys form “posses” and prey sexually on young girls—and, above all, why the press fixates on these stories.

Didion later said that her period of self-doubt began around 1966. “Everything I was taught seems beside the point,” she wrote in *Life* in 1969. “The point itself seems increasingly obscure.” She had said something similar in her piece about the hippies: “We had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing.”

Most readers would have had a hard time knowing exactly what rules she was talking about, or what “the point” was that everything seemed beside. She probably didn’t have a very clear idea herself. Her moment of insight came in 1971 or 1972, during a summer visit with Quintana, then five or six, to Old Sacramento, an area of the city reconstructed to look like downtown Sacramento, where Didion’s father’s great-grandfather owned a saloon, circa 1850.

She began telling Quintana about all the ancestors who had once walked on those sidewalks, and then she remembered that Quintana was adopted. Quintana had no relationship to Old Sacramento and its sidewalks and saloons. And this thought made her realize, as she put it later, that, “in fact, I had no more attachment to this wooden sidewalk than Quintana did: it was no more than a theme, a decorative effect.” Looking back, she decided that this was the moment when the story she had grown up with—“the entire enchantment under which I had lived my life”—began to seem foreign.

Didion described the Old Sacramento episode in her book about California, “Where I Was From.” That book, with

its grammatically pointed title (the phrase, of course, is “where I am from”), was published in 2003, but she had tried to write it thirty years earlier. She decided to wait until her parents were dead.

She also changed her publishing venue. She began writing for *The New York Review of Books* in 1973, at first about the movies, but increasingly about politics. Her editor there, Robert Silvers, was one of the people not interviewed by Daugherty, and this leaves a major hole in the biography. For Silvers was the key figure in Didion’s journalistic transformation. Her books “Salvador” (1983), “Miami” (1987), and “Political Fictions” (2001) are all based on pieces she wrote for him.

In 1988, after she and Dunne returned to New York, she began writing for *The New Yorker* as well. Daugherty didn’t interview her editors there, including Robert Gottlieb and Tina Brown. Yet many of the essays in the nonfiction collection “After Henry” (1992) and important parts of “Where I Was From” were first published in *The New Yorker*. (Full disclosure: you are reading this piece in *The New Yorker*.)

“Where I Was From” is the central book in Didion’s career. The subject is American self-deception. The California version has to do with what Didion calls “the crossing story as origin myth.” This is the legend of the pioneers in covered wagons who trekked across the Rockies and settled the state, the men and women who made the desert bloom—Didion’s ancestors. It’s a story about independence, self-reliance, and loyalty to the group. Growing up, Didion had been taught that for the generations that followed the challenge was to keep those virtues alive. There was always a new wave of settlers ready to sell out the pioneer spirit.

After the Old Sacramento moment, Didion came to see the whole pioneer mystique as bogus from the start. The cultivation of California was not the act of rugged pioneers, she decided. It was the act of the federal government, which built the dams and the weirs and the railroads that made the state economically exploitable, public money spent on behalf of private business. Didion called it “the subsidized monopolization” of the state.



“Morning, Brad.”

“Morning, Angelina.”

Big business had always run California. First, there were the ranches, then the corporate agribusinesses, and then, after the Second World War, the aeronautics industry, Boeing and Douglas, Lockheed and Rockwell. Defense contracts and government-funded infrastructure kept these businesses flush. Everyone else was a pawn in the game, living in a fantasy of hardy individualism and cheering on economic growth that benefitted only a few.

Social stability was a mirage. It lasted only as long as the going was good for business. When conditions got cheaper elsewhere or defense contracts shrank or mergers became appealing, the plants were shut down, workers were laid off, and the middle-class dream vanished in the smog. “This process,” Didion wrote, “one of trading the state to outside owners in exchange for their (it now seems) entirely temporary agreement to enrich us . . . had in fact begun at the time Americans first entered the state, took what they could, and, abetted by the native weakness for boosterism, set about selling the rest.”

When the social structure starts to crack is when the dropouts and the delinquents and the crazies turn up. These are not people who don’t know the rules. These are people who can see, without understanding why, that the rules no longer make sense. But, once people like that are thrown out of the system, once they become druggies or panhandlers or abusers of various sorts, no one wants them back in. They get scapegoated. Individual moral failure is taken

to be the problem. It can’t be the system.

Part of wagon-train morality was leaving the weakest behind to freeze in the mountain passes. Survival, not caring, is what Didion thinks that ethos finally boiled down to—“careless self-interest and optimism,” the California mentality. California’s answer to the problem of broken people was to build more prisons to put them in.

Didion’s most famous work in this mode is “Sentimental Journeys,” her article on the Central Park Jogger, which appeared in *The New York Review* in 1991. “Sentimental Journeys” is not really about the crime—the beating and rape in Central Park, in 1989, of a young white professional named Trisha Mieli—and it’s not about the trial of the mostly African-American teen-agers who were supposed to have confessed to it. The article is really about the coverage.

There were 3,255 reported rapes in New York City in 1989, some of them horrific. The press and the politicians seized on the Jogger story, Didion thought, because they saw a way to make it into an exemplary tale. The key to that story was that Mieli, although terribly battered, survived. Her personal fortitude could be made a symbol of the fortitude that all true New Yorkers display when the healthy frictions inherent in the city’s “gorgeous mosaic,” as its mayor, David Dinkins, called it, spin temporarily, if tragically, out of control. *Nous sommes* the Jogger.

Didion argued that Mieli’s story was

milks to distract attention from the city's underlying problems—specifically, the decay of its economic base, a condition that had been laid bare by the stock-market crash of October 19, 1987, Black Monday. “Stories in which terrible crimes are inflicted on innocent victims,” she wrote, “have long performed as the city's endorphins, a built-in source of natural morphine working to blur the edges of real and to a great extent insoluble problems.” (Son of Sam may have performed a similar role in the nineteen-seventies, the “Bronx is burning” decade.)

Didion thinks that this is why the press latches on to stories like the Jogger's. It's not because those stories tell us who we are. It's because they don't. They leave unexamined and untouched the class antagonisms and economic failures that are the underlying causes of socially destructive events. Personal stories feed the American illusion that the system is never the cause of anything. Those stories are always about fortitude, character, loyalty to the group.

The journalistic nut of the Jogger piece is the case of Laurie Sue Rosenthal. She was the mistress of an assistant city commissioner for elevator and boiler inspections, a man named Peter Franconeri, who happened to own an apartment at 36 East Sixty-eighth Street, between Madison and Park, and a house in Southampton. On the night of April 26, 1990, Rosenthal called her parents, in Queens, from the Sixty-eighth Street apartment and said she was being beaten. Sometime after that call, she died. In the morning, Franconeri rolled her body up in a carpet, put it out with the building's trash, and went to work.

The story did get into the papers, but officials downplayed the significance. “There were some minor bruises,” said a spokeswoman for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. A police officer complained to a reporter about Franconeri, “Everybody got upside down because of who he was. If it happened to anyone else, nothing would have come of it. A summons would have been issued and that would have been the end of it.”

Essentially, it was. Laurie Sue Rosenthal was determined to have suffered an accidental death from the combined effects of alcohol and Darvocet. Fran-

coneri pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and got seventy-five hours of community service. The suspects in the Jogger case got sentences of five to fifteen years, for crimes including a rape that, it turned out, they had not committed. But the Central Park suspects did not belong to what Didion called “the conspiracy of those in the know, those with a connection, those with a rabbi at the Department of Sanitation or the Buildings Department or the School Construction Authority or Foley Square, the conspiracy of those who believed everybody got upside down because of who it was, it happened to anybody else, a summons gets issued and that's the end of it.”

“Sentimental Journeys” was a brilliant interpretation of the Jogger story, and an impressive display of journalistic intuition. Didion was right to suspect that the accused teen-agers were wrongly convicted, something that was not established until 2002. She was wrong to suspect, though, that the city was on the rocks. Her hunch was that a shift from manufacturing to financial-services jobs was unsustainable. It did look that way for a while. But after 1992 the market took off, real-estate values along with it, and the city has not looked back. It is no longer fear of violent crime that is driving the middle class out of Manhattan.

Didion has always disliked interviewing. This is partly a matter of temperament: she doesn't think on her feet; she thinks in front of a keyboard. But it's also because she is convinced that you don't learn anything from interviews. “It doesn't matter to me what people say to me in the interview,” she has said, “because I don't trust it.” She considers reporters who fetishize the personal interview vacuous. “In any real sense,” she wrote in a piece on the best-selling books by the Washington *Post's* Bob Woodward, “these books are ‘about’ nothing but the author's own method.” She prefers documents, and most of her political journalism is based on a careful reading of newspaper stories, press releases, hearing transcripts, and the like.

This makes her later work, particularly the pieces collected in “Political Fictions,” which treat subjects like the Iran-Contra affair and the Starr Report,

seem a little more like literary criticism than like reporting. Didion was an English major at Berkeley at a time when close reading was the gold standard in literary analysis, and Daugherty suggests that those methods stuck with her. She has said as much herself.

There is a small but immitigable fallacy in the theory of close reading, though, and it applies to political journalism as well as to the reading of poetry. The text doesn't reveal its secrets just by being stared at. It reveals its secrets to those who already pretty much know what secrets they expect to find. Texts are always packed, by the reader's prior knowledge and expectations, before they are unpacked. The teacher has already inserted into the hat the rabbit whose production in the classroom awes the undergraduates.

Didion interprets the political text of American life according to a set of beliefs about disparities of wealth and class. She arrived at those assumptions worthily: by analyzing her own education and experience. And that's what she sees when she reads the newspaper or follows a campaign. She is never less than amazed by the willingness of everyone in the press to pretend, in the name of keeping the show going, that American life is really not about money and power.

In 1988, she covered Michael Dukakis's campaign for President. Dukakis was having “regular guy” problems running against George H. W. Bush, a Connecticut blueblood who had somehow managed to trans-class himself into a self-made Texan. It was just the sort of non-issue issue that Didion thinks has completely divorced electoral politics from the needs of the actual electorate. To address the guy gap, Dukakis and his aides came up with the plan of having the candidate, whenever his plane landed somewhere, play catch with his press secretary on the tarmac. Reporters duly filmed this performance, often in hundred-degree heat, to be shown on the evening news. It was, as Didion wrote, “a repeated moment witnessed by many people all of whom believed it to be a setup yet most of whom believed that only an outsider, only someone too ‘naïve’ to know the rules of the game, would so describe it.”

She thinks that this is how what she

calls “the permanent political class”—the press, the talk-show experts, the campaign strategists, the political parties, even the candidates themselves—has rigged the game. Everyone knows that what you see in politics is fake or con-fected, but everyone’s O.K. with that, because it’s all been focus-grouped.

One topic that Didion does like to talk about is writing. “I learned a lot of fictional technique” from script writing, she explained to Hilton Als, in an interview in 2006. And the novels are screenplay-like. She told Als that she became impatient with “the conventions of writing,” like description. Her scenes tend to be story-boarded—this character is here, that character is there. The main action is the dialogue.

You can see from the deftness and precision of that dialogue why she and Dunne were in such demand as script doctors. Although Didion’s novels are lurid enough, much of the speech is comic, in a gimlet-eyed, dead-end sort of way. But the books are literary caterpillars, texts that seem to be seeking their ultimate realization in the form of a motion picture.

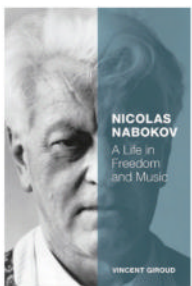
The fiction has been influential: Bret Easton Ellis, who went to college with Quintana, is a sworn disciple. But Didion’s nonfiction is what sets her apart. Daugherty thinks that it was the *Vogue* years that made the prose Didionesque, and this seems right. Didion is the quintessential magazine writer. Her books are short. “I always aim for a reading in one sitting,” she told Als, and that is how people normally read magazine pieces. The job of the magazine writer is never to give readers a reason to stop before they reach the end.

The No. 1 sin in print journalism is repetition. Pages are money; editorial space is finite. Writers who waste it don’t last. Conditions demand a willingness to compress and a talent for concision. The ellipses and the refrains that characterize much of Didion’s writing are methods of economizing the exposition and managing the reader’s experience, ways of getting the reader to participate in the job of making sense of whatever it is, hippies or someone who once wrote about hippies, that the writer is trying to think through. ♦

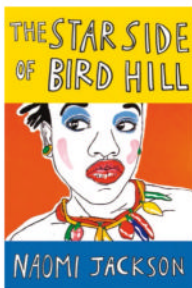
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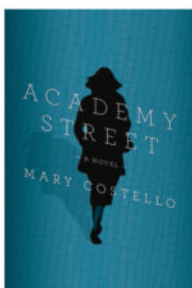
NAGASAKI, by Susan Southard (Viking). Through the stories of five survivors, or *hibakusha*, from Nagasaki, Southard presents a poignant and complex picture of the second atomic bomb’s enduring physical and psychological tolls. Eyewitness accounts are visceral and haunting: the heat was “like a slow execution” within a “monochromatic soundless hell.” But the book’s biggest achievement is its treatment of the aftershocks in the decades since 1945. Particularly compelling is Southard’s presentation of the ways in which *hibakusha* chose whether to publicly confront the trauma or (the more prevalent choice) to keep quiet. “On the inside, their self-imposed silence helped contain their grief, guilt, and devastating memories of the bombing,” she writes. “Living this divided life allowed them to move on.”



NICOLAS NABOKOV, by Vincent Giroud (Oxford). From 1951 to 1966, the composer Nicolas Nabokov (a cousin of Vladimir) ran the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an organization founded to promote Western cultural achievements as an anti-Communist bulwark. It was funded largely by the C.I.A., and, though Nabokov pleaded ignorance, his reputation never recovered. This extensively researched biography seeks to recognize the importance of Nabokov’s accomplishments both at the congress and as a composer of lush, neo-Romantic music. Giroud paints a vivid portrait of Nabokov, a dispossessed Russian aristocrat and charming raconteur who wrote music for the Ballets Russes, helped de-Nazify Germany, and kept company with James Joyce, Igor Stravinsky, and Isaiah Berlin.



THE STAR SIDE OF BIRD HILL, by Naomi Jackson (Penguin Press). In this debut novel, two sisters from Brooklyn are sent to live with their grandmother in Barbados when their mother’s mental health declines. They struggle against their new home, with its emphasis on obedience and religion, but eventually embrace it. The evocation of the island is romantic and alive, but it seems to function as a foil for America rather than as an entity in its own right: it’s a tight-knit community that nurtures and meddles in all the ways that New York alienates. The main characters include some well-worn figures—the wise grandmother, the tomboy, the promiscuous teen-ager with legs up to here—but Jackson renders their inner lives effectively.



ACADEMY STREET, by Mary Costello (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This slim, quiet novel follows an Irish immigrant, Tess Lohan, from a rural childhood in nineteen-forties Ireland to life as a nurse and single mother in New York. Tess endures the gradual loss of her loved ones as a grief “so deep her eyes could not weep.” Costello sets herself the hard task of writing about an unremarkable protagonist who leads a “timid life” and makes few connections. When Tess reflects that she has always “felt divided from others,” the reader can’t help wishing to be let in. Still, the concentration of Costello’s spare prose yields fine moments, as when Tess watches her newborn coolly, observing the “unknitted bones on his crown,” and finding him “half-hatched.”

REALITY HUNGER

A new movie, a new album, and the legacy of N.W.A.

BY HUA HSU



In the winter of 1969, Douglas Fairbanks Dollarhide, the recently elected mayor of Compton, California, travelled to Philadelphia to attend the annual meeting of the National Municipal League. For decades, the Los Angeles suburb had been admired for its affordable housing, its stable growth, and its prime location, between downtown and nearby Long Beach. The league had awarded Compton the coveted distinction of All-America City in 1952. But much had changed since then. The racist housing covenants that insured Compton would have an overwhelmingly white population had been overturned; the election of Dollarhide,

the son of a former slave, was a symbol of Compton's changing demographics. The city was now a beacon of middle-class possibility for its growing black population.

Dollarhide had come to Philadelphia to campaign for another All-America City prize. An article in *Jet*, earlier that year, praised Compton's "constructive" vision of "exerting black power through politics" rather than through violent protest. Dollarhide had worked his way up from the post office to the city council, and he wanted to show that, seventeen years after the first award, Compton was still a jewel of a suburb. As part of his (ultimately

unsuccessful) presentation, he played a simulated recording of what an L.A. paper described as "angry voices that one hears in a city." "These are the voices that face Compton and other cities," Dollarhide explained. Amid that clamor, he said, Compton was a model for what hardworking people with strong values could accomplish together.

In the opening minutes of "Straight Outta Compton," a new movie that dramatizes the rise of the rap group N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes), in the late nineteen-eighties, the mother of Dr. Dre scolds the young d.j. for his flip-pant attitude toward honest, nine-to-five work. She scans as a working-class striver, one of Dollarhide's people. Dre, by contrast, is half cynic, half dreamer; he refuses to wait his turn for a dead-end job. His refusal feels dangerous, as though he is rejecting an entire vision of progress. To his generation, which had grown up just as Compton's middle-class dreams dissolved, the gospel of upward mobility seemed like a cruel joke. After N.W.A.—Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and DJ Yella—released their brilliant, sweltering debut album, "Straight Outta Compton," in the summer of 1988, the city became synonymous with its "angry voices."

The film "Straight Outta Compton" tells the standard narrative of N.W.A., from local sensation to "the world's most dangerous group." That ascent began, modestly enough, with "Boyz-n-the-Hood," a self-released 1987 single credited to Eazy-E. As the film recounts in comic detail, the song was originally written for a group from New York, but, unable to comprehend its West Coast perspective or convincingly pronounce the local slang, they refused to record it. Dre and Cube, who had written the lyrics, convinced Eazy, a local drug dealer who bankrolled the recording session, to give it a try. He was a novice, scrawny-sounding rapper who could barely keep pace with Dre's scything beat. But his vulgar style contributed to the impression that the song offered an unfiltered glimpse into the group's daily reality: "bored as hell," cackling at all the neighborhood drama, living to survive rather than pining for the distant aspirations that had entranced their parents.

"Boyz" encapsulates something unique about N.W.A.'s eventual multiplatinum

On "Compton," Dr. Dre balances tales of triumph with back-in-the-day stories.

success. It wasn't just the violence and the profanity that made them so shocking. It was their stance of indifference. Their music was heavy and dense, like armor, and in their rhymes they recounted grim realities with a cold ambivalence. Against the late-eighties backdrop of MTV, moral hysteria, and the culture wars, the rise of N.W.A. represented total negation—of the mainstream music industry, of the status quo, of waiting your turn and holding your tongue. Well before anyone with an iPhone could document police brutality, the frustrations of young black people went viral by way of abrasively funky anthems like “Fuck the Police,” “Gangsta Gangsta,” and “Straight Outta Compton.” (For viewers under thirty, the movie's most bizarre moment may be when protesters disdainful of N.W.A.'s confrontational message steamroll and stomp on a pile of their CDs.)

The group's hell-raising wasn't motivated by a particular political agenda. All it insisted on was the freedom to tell things as they were. Realness would become one of hip-hop's articles of faith, and a new generation of musicians, inspired by Ice Cube's righteous fury, Ren's villainous cool, and Eazy's devil-may-care demeanor, would seek to put their own cities on the map. N.W.A., after all, had forcibly rebranded their home town. As the historian Josh Sides has detailed, Compton's subsequent notoriety would eventually have a strange effect on bordering cities, which began renaming stretches of Compton Boulevard so as to distance themselves from their troubled and suddenly famous neighbor. In 1990, East Compton became East Rancho Dominguez. A few years later, when Eazy-E asked the city's permission to shoot a video in Compton, Mayor Omar Bradley turned down his request. The effect of Eazy's music, he said, was “that when the mayor of Compton goes to New York, he's a joke. He's a joke because they think the city is full of animals.”

Despite an improved economy and demographic shifts—the majority of the population is now Latino—Compton retains its fabled image. In recent years, the music of rappers like Kendrick Lamar, YG, and the Game has led to a renewed interest in the city.

Dr. Dre has just released “Compton,” an album recorded in secret and inspired by his frequent visits to the “Straight Outta Compton” film set. It opens with a documentary-like spoken-word intro about the city in Dollarhide's day, when it represented the “black American dream.” Dre claims that “Compton” will be his last album, which perhaps explains its mood of nostalgia. On “It's All on Me,” he recalls, over a glistening soul sample, carefree times with friends, the daily indignity of being stopped and frisked, and all the success he's had since: “Took that feeling to the studio and cued it up/Now it's ‘Fuck the Police’ all up in the club.” Throughout “Compton,” Dre balances tales of his corporate triumphs with back-in-the-day stories, memories from when he was, as he raps on “Animals,” “just a young black man from Compton wondering who could save us.”

At times, Dre's tendency toward retrospection makes him seem like a ghost haunting his own album. Despite his stubbornly sparse output—his last album, “Chronic 2001,” was released in 1999—Dre always manages to sound modern, a remarkable feat given how often hip-hop has rebooted itself in the twenty-three years since his solo debut, “The Chronic.” He has remained relevant in part by becoming a crucial sponsor of up-and-coming talent, from Snoop Dogg to Eminem to the Game. On “Compton,” he cedes the spotlight to younger rappers—including Kendrick Lamar, King Mez, Jon Connor, and the versatile Anderson .Paak—and even adopts their cadences. The album was produced by Dre and several guests; Dem Jointz is credited, along with Dre, on some of the best songs, such as the slow-plunging “Genocide” and “Satisfaction,” which sounds like a deconstructed eighties funk tune. Ultimately, “Compton” is more absorbing as a carefully curated, high-definition tribute to N.W.A.'s outlaw legacy than as a lone artist's final statement about his home turf.

Both the movie and “Compton” serve as strange reminders of the divergent paths that the members of N.W.A. have taken since the group broke up, in 1991. Ice Cube, once a fearsome and prophetic figure protested for incendiary songs like “No Vaseline” and “Black Korea,” a man who rapped the lyric “Burn Hol-

lywood burn,” is a movie star who often appears in family comedies. Dre, whose early career was bedevilled by contractual struggles, is a music-industry kingpin, the founder of Beats Electronics, now a division of Apple. He makes more money selling headphones than he ever did from his records. (“Compton” was released exclusively through Apple Music, one of the fledgling service's early coups.)

Perhaps it's to be expected that a movie about N.W.A. that was co-produced by Dre, Ice Cube, and the widow of Eazy-E—Eazy died in 1995, of AIDS—should ascribe virtue and clear-minded intention to decisions that may have resulted from impulse or experimentation. Throughout the film, the members of N.W.A. come across as young idealists whose only sin was allowing their manager, Jerry Heller, to exploit them. The movie glosses over N.W.A.'s foul treatment of women, particularly the well-documented assault accusations against Dre.

Is there a greater privilege of wealth and fame than the ability to rewrite your own past—to bend reality yet again? Today, N.W.A. are rightly praised as up-by-their-bootstraps heroes. Dre has promised to use royalties from “Compton” to help create a local arts center. The current mayor of Compton, Aja Brown, is a hopeful, thirty-three-year-old urban planner who aims to trade on the city's mythic status to help reinvent and rebrand it in the style of Brooklyn. She has spoken of enlisting Dre and Kendrick Lamar to be ambassadors of sorts for this new Compton.

N.W.A.'s legacy isn't just a version of reality, skewed and personal as it may have been. It is an appetite for reality, a hunger to believe that plain truths set to a pounding beat might make the establishment quake in fear. The urge is so strong that it often obscures the messy borders between art and life. The group's most famous members are moguls whose music has inspired hundreds, perhaps thousands, of imitators, and their greatest songs continue to provide the soundtrack for revolt, now more than ever. They were not documentarians; they were performers, even if many people failed to recognize it at the time. That may be the realest thing about them. ♦

THE WAY STATION

A young couple takes a detour in Annie Baker's new play.

BY HILTON ALS



Annie Baker's "John" (a Signature Theatre Company production, at the Pershing Square) is so good on so many levels that it casts a unique and brilliant light. It's a handsome object, "old" in structure. While most new plays run for two hours or less—about the length of a TV movie—Baker's fourth full-length original script clocks in at three hours and fifteen minutes, the running time of, say, a short, late-career Eugene O'Neill drama. By not rushing things—by letting the characters develop as gradually and inevitably as rain or snowfall—Baker returns us to the naturalistic but soulful theatre that many of her contemporaries and near-contemporaries have dis-

avowed in their rush to be "postmodern."

With "John," Baker has done something exceptional on a political level, too: she has declared her ambition. The truth is that it's still an anomaly for women artists to claim this kind of space for themselves and their work. In the past, Baker has distanced herself from that particular problem by writing about boys—mostly white boys. Unlike the women playwrights who have most changed the contemporary American stage—Adrienne Kennedy, María Irene Fornés, Alice Childress, and Suzan-Lori Parks come immediately to mind—Baker has produced only one play about a woman's life, and it was a one-act comedy, a

relative trifle compared with her other work. Sometimes, it has been difficult to distinguish between Baker's world of guys and her own ethos. Her last play, "The Flick" (which won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2014), put me off, because I didn't know how to read the character of Avery, a twenty-year-old black man working in a movie theatre with a white girl he has a crush on and a boss who's all hot air and "authority." The character felt underdrawn to me, too willing to be a victim. I couldn't figure out whether that quality was meant to be specific to him or was, in Baker's view, a defining characteristic of his race. (Whenever black characters enter a largely white world in the present-day American theatre, I wince, and with reason, given such recent abominations as Douglas Carter Beane's "Shows for Days" and Bruce Norris's "The Qualms," in which the black male characters are a source of putrid jokes and racist sight gags.) Of course, it's foolish to walk into a play hoping that it will represent one's race or sex; the playwright's job is not to represent or stand up for anyone but to say something fascinating about humanity. Ultimately, Avery is a foil—the black "shadow" that Toni Morrison has written about—onto whom Baker projects her complicated, sometimes disappointing, but never less than human relationship to men, who interest her because they display their competitiveness more readily and openly, and thus more theatrically, than women do.

At first, you may think that "John" is going to be another Baker dude fugue, but it's the women who quickly take and then hold the stage. The twenty-nine-year-old Elias Schreiber-Hoffman (rendered, with just the right amount of sourpuss passive-aggressiveness, by Christopher Abbott) enters, followed by his Asian girlfriend, the thirty-one-year-old Jenny Chung (Hong Chau). It's late November, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and the couple are en route to New York, where they live, from Ohio, where they spent time with Jenny's parents. They've stopped off in Gettysburg because Elias, as a Jewish kid growing up with hippie parents in California, was "obsessed" with the Civil War and wanted to be a historian (not a musician, which is what he is now). So this little side trip is an indulgence—a visit to an enthusiasm of the past.

Abbott and Chau as a couple trying to come to terms with their differences in "John."

The bed-and-breakfast where the couple are staying is run by Mertis Katherine Graven (Georgia Engel), a seventy-two-year-old baby-voiced blonde. Mertis is fundamentally pleasant, and sees no reason not to litter her world with niceness. The sitting-room shelves are lined with dolls and miniature houses, all lit up invitingly; in the dining room, which she calls Paris, the tablecloths are white and lacy. By the time Mertis shows the couple to their room (the scene takes place offstage, but we can hear the three chatting overhead, just as we would if we were down below, waiting for the guests to get settled; it's a fabulous real moment, among many to come), we're already half in love with the trio's voices. They combine two distinct styles of American playwriting: Richard Maxwell's bone-dry, slow, humorous, and mundane speech and the excruciatingly beautiful, repressed-under-open-skies language of William Inge.

But Jenny and Elias are nothing like the frenzied lovers in Inge's "Splendor in the Grass," say; in fact, they're getting on each other's nerves. On their first morning at the B. and B., we see Elias eating cereal as Jenny tries to hide the fact that his slurping is irritating her. They're at that point in a relationship when just seeing your partner eat can go through you like a drill. Picking up on Jenny's discomfort, Elias uses the occasion to air his self-loathing, which, of course, makes the drama all about him:

JENNY: I can like hear you like breathing and smacking your tongue against the—

ELIAS: Sounds very Jewish.

JENNY: Wait, what?

ELIAS: Like, oh Jesus, the big loud hairy Jew is like smacking his lips again and chewing with his mouth open and it's totally repulsive.

JENNY: It has nothing to do with you being Jewish.

ELIAS: That's what you think.

But it doesn't matter what Jenny thinks—or feels. Which may be partly why she cheated on him in the first place. Yes, Jenny fooled around with a guy named John, a fact that Baker reveals slowly in the first half of the piece. The playwright doesn't give a reason for Jenny's infidelity; instead, with the help of her director, Sam Gold, she illustrates, with no false notes, how people like Elias and Jenny were brought up not to acknowledge difference, while at the same time being attracted to it and competi-

tive about it, too (*my difference is greater than yours and deserves more attention—and sympathy*). Baker brushes off the adolescent-boy porn-fantasy aspect of their relationship—the “sexy” trendiness of Jewish guys dating Asian girls, which was discussed, for instance, in Aaron Sorkin's 2010 movie “The Social Network”—and shows us, instead, how people can wear their difference like a hair shirt or shed it like hot pants, depending on how much they need it to get ahead.

Jenny doesn't exoticize herself as an Asian woman; she's more into being a stereotypical *girl* and manipulating the world that way. She has cramps and feels too ill, she tells Elias, to hang out at the battlefield with him. Cutting her tour short, she goes back to the B. and B., where she finds Mertis sitting by a window writing in a notebook. The exchange that follows bears echoes of Baker's outstanding 2012 adaptation of Chekhov's “Uncle Vanya,” which starred Engel as Marina. Jenny asks Mertis how she ended up in Gettysburg:

MERTIS: My sister used to work at Hanover Hospital and when I was going through a difficult time about fifteen years ago she encouraged me to move here and take a job at the hospital with her. So I did.

JENNY: Were you a nurse?

MERTIS: Oh no. My sister was a nurse. I just cleaned bedpans.

JENNY: Oh. O.K.

MERTIS: A year or two ago I ran into one of the doctors. And he wasn't always the nicest man when I worked there. I'm sure he was very busy and had a lot on his mind, but I think he wasn't as kind to me as he could have been. Anyway, he recognized me and he said: “What are you up to now, Mertis?” And I said: “Well, sir, I'm running a B. and B. with my husband and I'm doing quite well.” And that was a nice little moment in my life.

Mertis's humility is part of her old-fashioned grace. Next to her, Jenny, who earns a living writing questions for a game show, seems jangly, synthetic, “modern,” a texting creature who can't attend to much beyond her needs and secrets. (Of course, she lives in Brooklyn.) It's rare to find an actress of Chau's beauty and youth who's willing to go the distance and play a conniving cipher so unashamedly. Mertis, on the other hand, pushes past her own concerns, including a sick husband, to look forward. That's all—she looks forward—but Engel's performance is a wonder. And Baker writes magically for her. It's hard to sit still as Mertis talks about birds, for instance; you feel airborne with the sheer effervescence

of the sound she makes, building a world out of words and love. Mertis even loves her crusty, blind friend Genevieve (the consistently hilarious and true Lois Smith), who likes to describe how she committed herself to a mental hospital. When we meet her, in the second act—Elias is out, and Jenny and Genevieve are having a little white wine; Mertis doesn't drink—she articulates what Jenny cannot, since Jenny lives in a world of tweets:

JENNY: Like I'm always worried about objects and what they're thinking? . . . Elias thinks I have O.C.D. . . . When I was little I always worried about my dolls. I had this one doll, um, Samantha, and I always felt like she was incredibly angry at me.

GENEVIEVE: Of course she was angry.

MERTIS: What do you mean, Genevieve?

GENEVIEVE: Angry to be a doll! To be a piece of plastic or glass and to be shaped into a human form and trapped! With one expression on your face! Frozen! People manhandling you. And then put in a dress. Put in an itchy little dress!

Baker knows something about being an object. So do Jenny, Genevieve, and Mertis—they're women, after all. And that's what allows Baker to go further as a writer in “John” than she did in her earlier plays; the female characters don't have the luxury of not being held accountable, even when they're crazy. But Baker isn't presenting a reductive, “sisterhood is powerful” world. Mertis, Genevieve, and Jenny don't even speak the same language:

MERTIS: I just remembered a phrase but I don't remember who said it or if I read it somewhere. Forgive me if it was you, Genevieve, but it just keeps repeating itself in my head and I'll be dipped if I know where I heard it.

GENEVIEVE: Say it.

MERTIS: Deep Calling Unto Deep.

GENEVIEVE: That's definitely not me.

JENNY: I don't know what it means but I like it.

Mertis knows its meaning: she wears her depth on her sleeve. When, toward the end of the evening, Jenny and Elias's relationship reaches a breaking point, you know that Mertis will silently fold that sadness into her, as she has so many others. But for Mertis—and for us, too, thanks to Baker's outstanding writing and empathy—that sadness does not defeat; it simply burnishes her belief. In the play's final moments, she lights a candle that sends some chimes spinning around and around to the sound of their own music—a gesture that is, like almost everything she does, a bid for grace. ♦

ODD COUPLES

"The Man from U.N.C.L.E." and "Mistress America."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Why make a film of "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."? Who at Warner Bros. flicked the switch when the project got the green light? The demographics do not bode well. Teen-agers at the multiplex, knowing nothing of the TV show, which ran from 1964 to 1968, will glance at the title and go blank. Those of us who do recall the original will brace ourselves for a travesty. We have suffered through movies based on "Bewitched," "Get Smart," "Charlie's Angels," "Scooby-Doo," and "The Flintstones," so why should the alchemy work now? One answer, I guess, is "Mission: Impossible"—the brand that will not die. That alone gives hope to studio executives, convincing them that there is no straw, however flimsy or antique, that cannot be spun into gold.

The hook of "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." is, as ever, an underhanded pact between the superpowers. Our story begins in 1963, at Checkpoint Charlie, through which an American secret agent, Napoleon Solo (Henry Cavill), passes en route to East Berlin. His errand—to find a young German named Gaby (Alicia Vikander) and spirit her to the West—is impeded by Illya Kuryakin (Armie Hammer), who is more or less his Soviet counterpart. Solo's mission succeeds, but the two spies are then ordered to team up, by their respective chiefs, to foil a common foe. Gaby's father has gone missing; once "Hitler's favorite rocket scientist," he was latterly a servant of the Free World, and his know-how, in unscrupulous hands, could have dire results.

The Cold War—neither a war nor especially cold, given its simmering hostility—was a crisis of perpetual anti-

pation, and anyone approaching it in search of drama is faced with a choice of untruths. Either you plump for shiny high jinks, as epitomized by the early Bond pictures, or you descend into a stagnant netherworld of multiple bluffs, home to the toadish guile of George Smiley. Both attitudes presume that the contest of ideologies is a game, but the



Henry Cavill and Armie Hammer in Guy Ritchie's film.

first one regards it as sport, while the second is more akin to brooding over a chessboard. The director of "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." is Guy Ritchie, and there are hints, in the Berlin scenes, that he is tempted by the murkier option. Before long, however, as befits the maker of "Snatch" and "RocknRolla," he drops the shadowy chic, decamps to Rome, and gets down to silliness.

This takes many forms. We get a

lanky and expressionless blonde (Elizabeth Debicki), who is the villain of the piece. We also get Hugh Grant, cracking his shiftest grin, as a British intelligence wonk; embarrassment has long been the key to Grant's onscreen persona, but here he looks genuinely aghast. Everyone bathes in a flood of period detail: Trabants for Berlin, racing cars for Italy, stealable watches, Solo's natty suits, and, for Gaby, a parade of unquiet outfits, crowned, at the end, by a pair of shades that make Jackie Onassis's look like pince-nez. All of the above, sad to say, feels bought rather than lived in; you get a more bracing breath of the sixties from Austin Powers than you do from this meticulous reconstruction.

Ritchie, as is his wont, beefs things up with random acts of gimmickry; the camera crouches down to catch a freaky angle, or zooms in and out on the vehicles during a chase. The climactic raid on an island lair is conducted in split screen, denying us even the faintest grasp of what is going on. Worst of all are the mini-flashbacks, toying needlessly with time or whipping us through a character's past. Gaby's uncle, for instance, is cheerfully revealed to be a former Nazi doctor, with medical closeups to prove it, before being tortured by our heroes. What larks!

Offensiveness of that kind rarely scarred the charm of the television show. (Its initial title was "Ian Fleming's Solo," for the creator of 007 had also dreamed up Napoleon.) Unlike the film, it revelled in a paucity of backstories, and David McCallum's Kuryakin, in particular, remained as lightly mysterious as his hair. In a calamitous shift of emphasis, Ritchie turns Kuryakin into a semi-psychotic. Hammer tightens his fists, struggling not to explode and clearly wishing that he could run back to "The Social Network" and hide. As for Cavill, let us just say that the line between phlegmatic suavity and downright dullness is rather more easily breached than the Berlin Wall. Only twice does the men's comradeship inch beyond the casual—first, when Solo

drives a truck off a jetty and onto a baddie-filled boat, then sinks down and swims through dark waters to rescue his colleague, who is drifting, unconscious, nearby. The sequence is overlaid with the croon of an Italian love song, and you start to wonder just how badly the American would miss the strapping Russian if he were to expire. The clincher comes in a Roman boutique, where the agents get into a snit over the clothes that Gaby—to whom they pay scant attention—should wear for the next assignment. “You can’t put a Paco Rabanne belt on a Patou,” one says to the other, and you suddenly imagine them quitting the game and settling down together, on the Via Condotti, to start a fashion label of their own. Maybe the Cold War was nothing but a crush.

For fans of Noah Baumbach, it’s been a long wait between films: they’ve had to drum their fingers for twenty whole weeks, since the release of “While We’re Young,” back in March, and his new movie, “Mistress America.” The former derided not only the current wave of hipsters but the craving, on the part of an older generation, to become hipsterical, and “Mistress America” maintains this fixation with age. Tracy (Lola Kirke), a freshman at Barnard College, is eighteen and lonely, until she meets up with Brooke (Greta Gerwig), who is thirty, scatterbrained, and still gusted along by the eagerness of youth. “We’re ten, twelve years apart,” Brooke says, adding, “We’re contemporaries.”

The two are stepsisters-to-be—Tracy’s mother is set to marry Brooke’s

father—and the slightness of that link feels right for the frail, fissiparous world that Baumbach likes to map. Nobody seems to be a stayer; companionship and romance are things to be tried, found wanting, and tugged apart. Although Tracy warms to an awkward boy in her class (Matthew Shear), and they earn a few tender moments, the tenderness is snapped by a single shot, in which she sees him holding hands with another girl. Brooke has a boyfriend who’s away in Greece, yet their affinity, like every social contract in the film, comes with a mismatch built in: “He’s the kind of person I hate, except I’m in love with him.” That’s a line that Barbara Stanwyck would have delivered in one of two ways: spitting it out for melodrama, hot and sour, or tossing it away in a flutter of foolish chat. Gerwig picks the latter, and, indeed, the entire movie takes the ingredients of common distress, including betrayal and debt, and treats them as food for laughs. Not even bereavement is spared. “I watched my mother die!” Brooke shouts to Tracy, while they are out dancing, and then changes the subject to frozen yogurt.

Brooke is a hell of a role. The force of her whimsy, as she sprints from one fad to another (“I would *love* to get into the app business”), is driving her, you sense, toward the fringes of lunacy. That was true of many screwball heroines, and whether Gerwig—Baumbach’s muse, what with “Greenberg” and “Frances Ha”—belongs in such company depends on whether you find her manner grating, endearing, or both. As “Mistress America” progressed, I was drawn to the tacit and more watchful

figure of Tracy, as she herself watches Brooke. There is something half-formed about Tracy (she is first seen in silhouette, hauling a suitcase into her dorm room), and we are never quite sure, thanks to Kirke’s crafty performance, if she is latching on to the older woman for comfort, for thrills, or for sneakier purposes. Tracy wants to be a writer: a natural compulsion, in Baumbach’s work, but also a dangerous one, and woe betide the lover, pal, or confidant who is sucked into another person’s fiction.

Midway through, we travel to Connecticut. (A very Stanwyckian destination; she went there, under false pretenses, in both “Christmas in Connecticut” and “The Lady Eve.”) You might expect that Baumbach, marooned outside New York, would be all at sea, yet the ensemble riffs that ensue, as Brooke, surrounded with onlookers, beseeches an old flame for funds to invest in a restaurant (“It would be the *best* of capitalism”), represent the happiest and most populous stretch of action in the director’s oeuvre. It reminded me of “Bullets Over Broadway,” not in its setting but in its racking up of dramatic personae, and in the farcical wrestling of life and art. While Woody Allen’s recent films have grown ever more hermetic in their perplexity, Baumbach is becoming as prolific, and as quick on the comic draw, as the Allen of yore. Will historians of humor look back on this movie, perhaps, and mark it as the point at which the torch was passed? ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Julia Suits, must be received by Sunday, August 23rd. The finalists in the August 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the September 7th issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the United States, Canada (except Quebec), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"I live about three seconds from here."
Drew Kitts, Falmouth, Mass.



THE FINALISTS

"I've never been snookered so properly before."
Brian Wilkerson, Georgetown, Ky.

"Solids or pinstripes?"
Brent Baker, Highland Park, N.J.

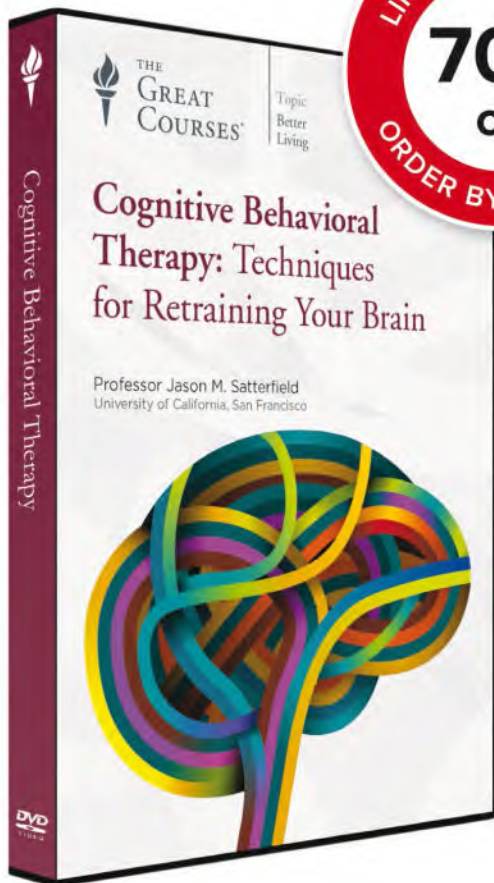
"You don't need English on every shot."
Nate Suri, Westfield, N.J.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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